Moving Forward

by BakenandEggs

Summary

Tony is struggling with Kate's death, his job at NCIS, and the fact that none of his relationships seem to work out. Enter JJ, Paula Cassidy's cousin.
Chapter 1

JJ wrapped her hands around her mug of hot coffee and tried not to stare expectantly at the café entrance. She felt so awkward, sitting alone in a café waiting for her cousin to arrive. It was silly because she knew from experience that if she had come to the café with the intention of sitting alone she wouldn’t feel awkward at all – if anything she would feel empowered. But sitting and waiting for Paula made her feel embarrassed – almost as though everyone else in the café would know that she had been stood up.

The café door opened and JJ looked up hopefully, only to sigh in disappointment when the woman who entered was not her cousin. She wasn’t even sure why she was surprised. It wasn’t as though Paula being late was anything new – her cousin’s propensity for lateness was a family joke.

JJ looked up again when she heard the door open and smiled in relief when she saw her cousin. Paula returned her smile with a grin and made her way over the table where JJ was sitting.

“Sorry, Jenny.” Paula grinned sheepishly. “I’ll just grab a coffee. Do you want a top up?”

JJ glanced down at her half empty mug. “Another latte would be great.”

“Coming right up.” Paula promised, before taking her purse out of her handbag and then leaving the handbag at the table.

Barely a minute later, Paula slipped into the seat opposite JJ and grinned at her. “Sorry again for being late.”

JJ shrugged with a smile. “I probably should expect it by now. But aren’t you…”

“Military folk supposed to be timely.” Paula finished the sentence with a laugh. “So my father tells me.”

JJ grinned. “Not that you’re actually military.”

“No more than you are.” Paula agreed.

“A little more than I am.” JJ argued with a smile. “You actually work for the Navy.”

Paula’s eyes sparkled. “It’s good to see you, Jenny.”

“You too.” JJ agreed. “How has the Agent Afloat position been treating you?”

“It’s been good.” Paula answered. “But over now, thank goodness. One year on a ship is quite enough for me.”

JJ smiled. “Where are you stationed now? At the Navy Yard?”

“For now.” Paula nodded. “I’ve been temporarily assigned as TAD to the MCRT for a week. They just lost one of their agents.”

JJ winced, she had read about the death of a NCIS agent’s in the Post. “Did you know her?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t imagine losing a member of my team.” JJ commented with a small shudder. “I know it’s
always a risk, but…”

“It’s hard to believe that it might happen until it does.” Paula finished for her.

They fell into a sober silence, only broken when a waitress brought them their coffees.

“Sorry,” Paula apologised once the waitress had gone. “I didn’t mean to bring the mood down.”

“It’s fine.” JJ told her with a weak smile. “So, how are you enjoying working with a team again?”

Paula shrugged. “I don’t start until next week, the USS Kennedy just got in a few days ago.”

JJ smiled warmly. “Where are you staying?”

“With an old friend.” Paula answered. “We dated back in college and have kept in touch ever since.”

JJ searched her memory for the names of Paula’s past boyfriends. “Robert or Justin?”

“Robert.” Paula told her. “He’s a lawyer now.”

“Any chance of the two of you two getting back together?” JJ asked with a grin.

Paula laughed. “No way. He’s looking for someone to settle down with.”

JJ considered her cousin. “And you’re not?”

“I thought I was,” Paula admitted. “But I was dating this guy last year. He was great – comes across as a real playboy – but then I got to know him and realised that it was all an act. He’s sweet and smart and desperate to find someone to commit to. Which should have made me happy.”

“But no?” JJ asked.

Paula shook her head. “No so much. I broke up with him after a few months. I don’t want to be tied down.”

“See that doesn’t make sense to me.” JJ admitted. “I guess I just don’t see it as being tied down.”

“Maybe you should date him then.” Paul grinned.

JJ paused, trying to decide whether her cousin was serious. The guy sounded great, but she was pretty sure that you weren’t supposed to date your cousin’s ex. And you definitely weren’t supposed to ask your cousin to set you up with her ex.

“What does that look mean?” Paula asked her curiously. “Are you seeing anyone? Would you like me to set you up with Tony?”

JJ bit her lip nervously. “Would you be alright with that?”

“Sure!” Paula looked thrilled. “He’s a bit older than you.”

“A bit older as in five years older?” JJ asked cautiously. “Or a bit older as in twenty years older than me?”

“Ten years older.” Paula told her.

JJ considered that. So the guy, Tony, was thirty seven – that wasn’t too bad. “What does he do?”
“He’s an NCIS agent.” Paula grinned. “He’s the Senior Field Agent of the MCRT.”

“So you’ll be working with him next week then.” JJ realised. “That’ll be awkward – having him as your superior.”

“Not really.” Paula denied. “Tony’s not like that.”

“He sounds too good to be true.” JJ admitted.

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far.” Paula laughed. “He’s, uh, indescribable really. Should I set the two of you up?”

JJ considered that, trying to ignore her heart that was beating excitedly at the prospect. “What’s his worst flaw?”

“That’s hard.” Paula’s forehead crinkled in concentration. “As I said, he’s got this playboy persona – flirts with anything in a skirt, plays pranks on his team mates, and all that. But once you really get to know him, that all fades away.”

JJ waited patiently for Paula’s answer. It wasn’t often she got the opportunity to get the scoop on a guy before dating him.

“I’d say it’s probably his lack of motivation.” Paula said after a minute. “He’s one of the best agents at NCIS, and if he played the game I reckon he’d be on track for the director’s chair. But he has no interest at all. I wouldn’t be surprised if he stayed on Gibbs’ team until Gibbs retires.”

“Gibbs?” JJ asked in confusion.

“He’s the lead agent of MCRT.” Paula explained. “Tony’s been in his team for four years now and I don’t think he has any interest in going anywhere.”

“That’s not too bad, as far as flaws go.” JJ pointed out. “It’s not as though I plan to be running the FBI one day – I’d be happy to stay with the BAU forever.”

“I’m the same.” Paula agreed. “I hope that I’ll get my own team one day, but there’s no way I want any more responsibility than that. It’s just that Tony has so much potential and he seems to go out of his way to hide it.”

“Again, not exactly a terrible flaw.” JJ pointed out. “Not when I compare it to the guys I’ve dated in the last three years. They were either intimated by the fact that I could out shoot them, or jealous of the time I spend at work. At least being a federal agent this Tony guy would understand.”

“He would at that.” Paula agreed. “On the negative side, he’d be just as busy as you and so it might be hard to find time to see each other.”

“And you honestly wouldn’t mind?” JJ asked. “Isn’t there some kind of rule about not dating your friend’s ex?”

Paula waved a hand dismissively. “I don’t mind at all. But you have to promise to tell me all about it.”

1-1-1

When Tony woke up on Monday morning he considered calling in sick. Paula Cassidy would be arriving today and would be working with their team for a week as Kate’s temporary replacement.
Tony got up, pulled on some running clothes, and headed out his door – all the while trying to ignore the giant sinking weight in his gut that had been his constant companion since Kate had died. Died. Died. Died. Kate was dead. She had been shot through the head. One minute she had been talking and then next she had been lying on the rooftop with a bullet in her head. And Tony hadn’t done anything to stop it.

Which wasn’t fair. Tony reminded himself firmly as he walked out of his apartment building and did a few stretches. There hadn’t been anything he could do. There was no way he could have stopped it. Kate was dead because Ari had shot her and Tony refused to absolve the man even slightly by taking some of the blame onto himself.

Still, the knowledge that the blame for Kate’s death rested entirely on Ari’s shoulders didn’t lessen the sinking weight. Sure Kate hadn’t exactly been his friend, she had actually driven him crazy, but she had been a member of his team. They had worked together, joked together, avoided Gibbs together, and now she was dead. The fact that she hadn’t even bothered to look past his persona and had treated him like an idiot hardly mattered now. She was dead and she wasn’t coming back.

Tony set off running, heading towards the park a few blocks away, and tried to turn his focus away from Kate’s death. It was nice to run regularly again. He’d started running every morning when he’d attended Rhode Island Military Academy – a habit that he had kept through his years at college and then when he was working with the police. He’d stopped running regularly when he joined NCIS, mostly due to the exhaustion that came from working with Gibbs, and had only started again under Doctor Pitt’s orders. Apparently it was necessary to keep his damaged lungs in good shape.

At first he had hated running. His lungs had hurt, along with his muscles, and it had been a daily reminder that the plague had permanently damaged his lungs. He’d been running for two months now though and it had become the best part of his day. There was something relaxing about running and it gave him time to think.

Tony turned off the road and into the park, choosing the left path that would take him into the small forest area. He wasn’t sure whether he was looking forward to seeing Paula again. On the one hand, she was a lot of fun and he had always enjoyed working with her. One the other hand, she had been the first woman he had really opened up to since Wendy and she had dumped him. He wasn’t quite melodramatic enough to think that she had broken his heart, but she had hurt him none the less. Mostly because she had confirmed a theory he had about himself – people were only really interested in ‘Very Special Agent Tony Dinozzo’, they didn’t want to know the real him.

Everything had been fine when they started dating. They had teased each other, laughed a lot, talked about work, had fantastic sex, and then Tony had made the mistake of opening up a bit. He’d told her about his relationship with Wendy and, in a fit of madness, admitted that he hoped their relationship would turn out better. Paula had broken up with him a week later. They had parted on amiable terms and had even worked together since, but Tony wasn’t looking forward to having to spend the entire week working in close quarters with her. Work was hard enough at the moment, with Kate being gone, without adding Paula to the mix.

Paula who would technically be his subordinate (not that it really meant anything on Gibbs’ team – the only person allowed to hold a rank in Team Gibbs was Gibbs) which would mean that Tony would have to go out of his way to make sure that she didn’t feel uncomfortable. He doubted she was looking forward to working with him again either.

1-1-1

Gibbs and McGee were already in the bullpen when Tony arrived and Gibbs greeted him with a glare. Tony ignored him. It wasn’t as though he was late – he was a whole three minutes early.
Tony put his backpack on the floor and then settled in behind his desk, before switching his computer on and waiting impatiently for it to boot up. He looked around the office, ignoring Kate’s empty desk, and saw that McGee was staring at him.

Tony tilted his head to the side curiously. “Can I help you, Probie?”

“N-no.” McGee flushed and quickly looked back to his computer.

Tony turned his attention back to his own computer and quickly logged in before opening his email programme. Time to slog through all the emails he had received over the weekend.

It was ten minutes later, after Gibbs had gone to do whatever he did when he wasn’t sitting behind his desk, that McGee spoke up.

“Did you hear that Agent Cassidy will be joining our team this week, Tony?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “No, McGee. I completely missed that piece of information, despite having been right next to you when we were told.”

“Oh, right.” McGee flushed again. “Well, are you looking forward to seeing her?”

“Of course I am.” Tony turned to grin at the younger man. “Agent Cassidy is always fun to work with.”

McGee frowned. “But won’t it be awkward, what with the two of you having broken up?”

Tony rolled his eyes again. “That was a year ago, Probie.”

“I know.” McGee persisted. “But won’t it?”

Tony screwed up the nearest piece of paper and aimed it at McGee’s forehead. He grinned in amusement when it bounced off his nose. “Of course not. Agent Cassidy and I are both professionals.”

“Says that man who’s throwing paper balls at his colleague.” Paula’s voice sounded from behind Tony.

Tony turned around hurriedly, flushing slightly when he almost fell off his chair. “Agent Cassidy, how lovely to see you.”

Paula looked sceptical. “Is Gibbs here?”

“He’s around.” Tony told her, waving a hand around vaguely.

“Right.” Paula said. “Can I have a word with you, Tony? In private?”

“Oh, sure.” Tony’s heart thudded nervously as he stood up and led her down through the bullpen and into one of the meeting rooms. What could she want from him? He doubted it was anything work related, there would be no need to talk privately if it was, but he also knew that there was no way that she would be wanting to ask him out. What else did they have to talk about? Unless she wanted to make sure that he would treat her professionally for the week she worked with the team.

“So, Tony,” Paula started once he’d closed the door behind them. “How have you been?”

“Fine.” Tony answered lightly, trying not to think about the night he had spent dying of the plague or what Kate had looked like with a bullet hole in her head. Instead he focussed his attention on how
good Paula looked leaning against the table and one of his memories of how good she had looked naked.

Paula grimaced. “Sorry, that was silly question. How are you holding up?”

Tony shrugged and looked away as his image of a naked Paula slipped away. “I’m fine.”

“You seeing anyone?” Paula asked.

Tony looked back at her in surprise. “What?”

“I’m not asking for me.” Paula said hurriedly. “I’ve got a cousin I think you’d get on with?”

Tony raised his eyebrows sceptically. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Paula confirmed with a nod. “So are you seeing anyone?”

“Not at the moment.” Tony told her. He hadn’t felt like dating since Kate had died. Actually, he hadn’t felt like dating since Paula had broken up with him, what was the point? It hadn’t stopped him of course. His relationships with women, short though they were, were the only times anyone ever touched him – he just hadn’t felt like being touched since Kate had died.

“You interested in a blind date?” Paula actually sounded hopeful.

Tony considered it. “Can you tell me anything about her?”

“She’s a federal agent,” Paula started. “Works as the Media Liaison for the FBI’s Behavioural Analysis Unit. She’s tall, blond, and only twenty seven.”

Tony didn’t know what was worse, her occupation or her age.

“So?” Paula prompted him. “Can I set the two of you up? One date, no strings attached.”

Tony grimaced but nodded slowly. It sounded like a terrible idea, but he supposed it was time to get back on the horse.

“Great.” Paula beamed at him. “I’ll contact Jenny and arrange a time. What evening would work best for you?”

“Any day.” Tony answered. “So long as we don’t have a case.”

“Got it.” Paula grinned for a moment, before her expression turned serious. “She’s not like me, Tony. She actually wants something serious. Give her a chance.”

Tony looked away uncomfortably. This was a terrible idea.

1-1-1

JJ stared at her wardrobe, most of which had been thrown across her bed, in despair. What had she been thinking agreeing to a blind date? And, more importantly, what should she wear? Normally she would wear a dress, but that felt too dressy for a blind date.

When her doorbell rang, JJ looked up with a relieved smile and went to let Paula in. She had never been so glad that she had agreed to let her cousin help her prepare for the date.

JJ opened her door, only to freeze in horror – her smile slipping from her face. “Are you alright?
What happened?”

Paula’s face was covered in bruises, but she smiled weakly anyway. “I’m fine. We just had a bit of a rough case.”

“What happened?” JJ repeated, ushering her cousin in. She moved to her kitchenette and put the kettle on.

“Do you know the name Kyle Boone?” Paula asked her, leaning against one of the benches.

“Sit down.” JJ told her firmly, gesturing towards her lounge suite. “And yes. My team has been talking about him this week. He’s a serial killer, killed twenty two women, but only five bodies were found. He’s being executed in a few days.”

“Right.” Paula lowered herself into a chair with a small groan. “Well the agent who arrested him was Gibbs…”

“The agent who runs the team you’ve been working with this week?” JJ asked.

“That’s the one.” Paula sighed. “Boone claimed that he would divulge the locations of the other seventeen bodies if he got to talk to Gibbs.”

JJ shook her head unconsciously as she remembered the things that Morgan and Reid had been saying. “Unlikely.”

“That’s what Gibbs said.” Paula smiled painfully. “But the Governor ordered Gibbs to co-operate.”

JJ’s heartrate increased despite the fact that she could see that her cousin was fine. “But your team got to you in time?”


JJ grimaced sympathetically. “You alright?”

“About killing him?” Paula asked. “He’s not the first criminal I’ve had to kill and I doubt he’ll be the last. It’ll take me a while to get my head around it, but then I’ll be fine.”

The kettle boiled and JJ set about making both her and Paula a cup of tea. “Black, one sugar right?”

“Right.” Paula agreed. “So, on a more cheery note, how are you feeling about tonight?”

“It’s a terrible idea.” JJ groaned. “I haven’t been on a blind date since college.”

“It’s not exactly blind.” Paula argued. “I brought you a picture.”

JJ carefully passed her cousin the tea, before settling into another seat with her own tea. “Really?”

“I figured one of you ought to know what the other one looks like.” Paula grinned. “It’s in my bag.”

“I’ll get it.” JJ said quickly, placing her tea on her coffee table and moving to pick up Paula’s bag. “Moving must be agony for you right now.”
“Two broken ribs will do that.” Paula agreed.

JJ winced sympathetically. “So what am I looking for?”

“It’s in the magazine.” Paula told her.

JJ pulled out the only magazine in the handbag and carried it back to her chair.

“The photo should be near the front.” Paula said, sipping at her tea. “I put it there this morning.”

JJ opened the magazine and turned a few pages until she found a photo sitting onto of one of the pages. The man in the photo was obviously older than JJ, and Paula for that matter, but not in a bad way. Paula had said that Tony was thirty seven, which sounded pretty old to JJ – he was only three years from forty – but, man, did he look good for his age.

“Nice, huh?” Paula looked amused.

“Yeah.” JJ admitted. “Anything else you can tell me?”

“Give him a chance.” Paula told her seriously. “Tony doesn’t open up well. Chances are he’ll spend the date being suave and charming, which isn’t bad, but he won’t open up at first.”

“That’s alright.” JJ smiled. She was feeling better about the date already. “Nobody really opens up on a first date.”

“Good point.” Paula acknowledged. “So, what are you planning to wear?”

1-1-1
At exactly 6.50, JJ left her apartment building and began walking towards Calzavara’s Restaurant where she would be meeting Tony. Paula had allowed her to choose the restaurant, something that JJ was very thankful for, and she had chosen one that she knew well. It was one less thing to worry about and, as an added bonus, was only a five minute walk from her apartment. Which, if she was honest, was the only reason that she had agreed to wear the heels that Paula had decided on. Admittedly the heels looked amazing with the blue dress Paula had chosen, but they had definitely not been designed for walking in.

When she reached the restaurant, a small Italian place that was never as busy as it ought to be, JJ paused for a minute to try and calm herself down. There was nothing to worry about. It was just a date. Worst case scenario she had a terrible evening and learned never to let Paula set her up again. Still, JJ could feel her heart beating faster than usual as she pushed the door open and walked inside.

The restaurant was obviously having a busier night than normal and JJ’s eyes quickly swept the room to see if her date had arrived yet. She spotted him eventually, sitting at a small table near the back of the room. He was watching her as though he was trying to figure out whether or not she was his date and JJ couldn’t help but be thankful that Paula had shown her his picture. This would be a lot more awkward if neither of them knew what the other looked like.

“Ciao, signora.”

JJ turned her attention to the waiter who had greeted her and smiled. “Ciao. I booked under the named ‘Cassidy’.”

The waiter, whose name JJ knew from previous visits to the restaurant was Al, nodded in understanding. “Of course. If you will please follow me.”

JJ followed him across the restaurant to the table where Tony was sitting.

“Can I get you anything to drink, signora?” Al asked her.

JJ looked down at the table and saw that Tony didn’t have a drink yet. “Maybe in five minutes.”

Al nodded in understanding and left them alone.

“You must be Jenny.” Tony greeted her with an appreciative smile.

“JJ.” JJ corrected him kindly, sitting down opposite the man. Paula had definitely been right about him being charming and he’d only said four words. “I take it you’re Tony?”

“Tony Dinozzo.” Tony agreed with a broad smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise.” JJ agreed, before finding herself completely lost for something to say. It was awkward, knowing basically nothing about him except for the information that Paula had given her which he probably would rather she didn’t know. JJ regretted having asked Paula so many questions about the man – it had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now it felt like an invasion of privacy.

“Paula said you were an FBI agent?” Tony asked smoothly after a few seconds of silence.

“Yes,” JJ answered quickly, grateful that he was apparently better at making conversation than she was. “I’m the Behavioural Analysis Unit’s Liaison. It’s my job to work with bureaucrats, the media,
“Is it usual for individual units to have liaisons?” Tony asked curiously. “NCIS has a Public Relations department, but that’s it.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say it’s usual.” JJ told him. “But it’s not uncommon either. The BAU has one due to the nature of the cases that we work. There is often a lot of public fear and upset when we take on a case and my job is to soothe over any ruffled feathers.”

Tony nodded in understanding. “That sounds useful, particularly in regards to Law Enforcement. Gibbs, my boss, is renowned for ruffling LEOs’ feathers.”

“I take it you don’t often work alongside them then?” JJ asked with an amused smile. “Because I can’t see that going down well.”

“Never more than we have to.” Tony grimaced. “Normally when we get a case the LEOs turn it over to us. They have enough on their plate and any case involving navy personnel is automatically our jurisdiction.”

“We actually have to be invited in by the LEOs.” JJ explained. “If they don’t want us involved we can’t do anything.”

“Ouch.” Tony grimaced. “That must be frustrating.”

“It’s not usually a problem.” JJ shrugged. “Most of the time they’re just relieved to have some help. Of course the fact that we have a reputation of not ruffling feathers helps.”

“What happens if they don’t invite you in?” Tony asked curiously. “Do you have anything you can do to try and convince them?”

“None,” JJ grimaced remember the few times that they had been denied invitations to cases. “Which is why my job is so important.”

“I’ll say.” Tony agreed. “So how long have you worked for the FBI?”

JJ opened her mouth to answer him, but closed it again when she saw that Al was making his way over to their table.

“Sorry to disturb you.” Al told them, placing menus on the table in front of them. “Can I get you any drinks or antipastos?”

“A merlot please, Al.” JJ smiled. “And maybe a Bruschetta platter?” She added, turning to Tony questioningly.

“Bruschetta sounds great.” Tony agreed. “Do you have Montepulciano d’Abruzzo?”

JJ’s eyebrows rose in surprise at how genuinely Italian Tony’s pronunciation was.

Al looked surprised as well. “Si.”

Tony turned to JJ. “How would you like to try a proper Italian wine?”

“Alright.” JJ agreed readily. “So long as you promise that I’ll enjoy it.”

Tony smiled. “Definitely.” He turned back to Al. “We’ll have a bottle then.”
JJ glanced at the drinks menu, wondering at how much the bottle would cost, before turning her gaze away resolutely. It didn’t matter.

“Si,” Al wrote on his notepaper. “One glass of merlot, one Bruschetta platter, one bottle of Montepulciano d’Abruzzo?”

“Not the merlot,” JJ decided. “I’ll stick with the other wine.”

“Very well.” Al nodded. “Anything else?”

“No, thank you.” Tony shook his head and Al moved away.

JJ turned back to Tony. “Do you speak Italian?”

“Si.” Tony answered with a wide smile. “I am an Italian American.”

“Really?” JJ looked him over. “You don’t look particularly Italian.”

Tony laughed lightly. “No, I’m only a quarter Italian. My great-grandparents came across from Italy together, but their son, my grandfather, married a non-Italian woman, as did my father.”

“But you speak the language?” JJ asked.

“I started learning it as a child.” Tony explained. “And then took Italian in high school, as well as a few papers in college. I am fluent now.”

JJ was impressed. “Do you speak any other languages?”

“Well there’s English,” Tony grinned. “But I also speak Spanish. I learnt that when I was child as well. I also speak some clumsy Mandarin.”

“Three and a half languages is impressive.” JJ commented. “I imagine that it comes in handy in cases.”

“Some.” Tony shrugged. “So how long have you been a feebie?”

JJ smiled in amusement. “A feebie?”

Tony grinned. “Yeah, you know, a FBI agent.”

“Five years.” JJ answered. “I got an internship with them the summer after I completed my Communication Masters, after that I got a job in their Public Relationship office and, as soon as I was eligible, applied to become an actual agent. I’ve been working with the BAU for about a year and a half now.”

“Five years is a long time.” Tony pointed out. “I’ve been at NCIS four years now and, aside from college, it’s the longest I’ve ever been in one place.”

“Four years isn’t too shabby.” JJ said. “What did you do before you were a NCIS agent?”

“I was a detective with Baltimore PD.” Tony answered. “Before that I was with Peoria PD and then Philadelphia PD.”

“What college did you go to?” JJ asked.

“Ohio State.” Tony looked proud. “I was there on an athletic scholarship – basketball.”
JJ grinned. “I went to the University of Pittsburgh on an athletic scholarship – soccer.”

“Really?” Tony looked her over with an appreciative gaze. “I can see that.”

JJ could feel herself blushing and couldn’t help but be relieved when she saw Al coming over with their wine and Bruschetta. She sat silently as Al placed it all on their table and then, when he asked what they wanted to order, quickly picked up the menu – thankful for more of an excuse to get herself under control.

JJ couldn’t help but enjoy the sound of Tony’s pronunciation of the dish that he ordered. Italian was definitely an attractive language, especially when spoken by someone like Tony.

Once Al had left them alone again, Tony picked up the bottle of wine and poured them each a glass. “Tell me what you think.”

JJ picked up one of the glasses and spent a few seconds looking at the wine inside the glass. It was an inky purple colour that made JJ wish that she had a dress, or even blouse, in a similar shade – it was beautiful. She raised the glass to her lips and took a small mouthful. It was good, really good, and definitely better than her merlot would have been.

“Nice, right?” Tony asked as he watched her with a smile. “I like the earthiness of it.”

JJ swallowed the wine and returned Tony’s smile. “It’s probably the best wine I’ve ever tasted. The feel of it is strange though.”

“It’s thicker than most wines.” Tony agreed. “Almost syrupy. Did you smell it?”

JJ hadn’t, so she lifted the wine glass again and breathed in through her nose. “Wow.”

“I know.” Tony’s smile widened. “Italians make great wine.”

JJ looked towards the drinks menu again. “How much does this cost? A wine this good must be expensive.”

“My treat.” Tony told her smoothly. “A beautiful wine for a beautiful woman.”

JJ could feel herself blushing again, despite the cheesiness of the line, and she cleared her throat nervously. “So are you wine connoisseur? Or just a connoisseur of all things Italian?”

“Neither.” Tony laughed. “I’m more of a journeyman than anything. Not an expert, but not exactly a novice either.”

“I like that.” JJ smiled. “I’m definitely a novice.”

“Maybe I can teach you then.” Tony’s tone lowered.

JJ felt herself blushing again. “That sounds like fun.”

Tony grinned crookedly, before apparently deciding to take pity on her and change the subject. “So what was your major?”

“Communication.” JJ answered in relief. “What about you?”

“Phys. Ed.” Tony grinned. “It was great.”

“And your graduate degree?” JJ asked.
Tony shook his head. “What makes you think I have one?”

“Paula said you were a Senior Field Agent which, at the FBI at least, requires a graduate degree.” JJ explained.

Tony looked slightly sheepish. “Right, Criminology actually.”

“They let you do that with a Phys. Ed. major?” JJ asked in surprise before wincing. “Sorry, that was rude.”


“That makes more sense.” JJ nodded, remembering what Paula had said about Tony going out of his way to seem less capable than he was. She presumed this sort of thing was what she had been talking about. “I imagine that comes in handy with your profession?”

“A lot more than my Phys. Ed degree does.” Tony grinned. “Though being an athlete is definitely useful when I’m chasing down a suspect. One of the members of my team did a double major and then masters as well, only his were in bio-medical engineering and computer forensics. He’s great with computer stuff, but give him a criminal to chase and he’s puffed within three minutes.”

JJ grinned. “We’ve got someone a bit like that in our team too. He’s got a BA in Psychology and one in Sociology, as well as three PhDs in Maths, Chemistry, and Engineering. The guy’s a genius and I love him, but running is not something he does well.”

“Three PhDs?” Tony repeated. “Who has the time to get three PhDs?”

“He’s only twenty four.” JJ told him, enjoying his amazed expression. “As I said, a genius.”

“I thought the FBI had age requirements.” Tony said. “Is he old enough to qualify?”

“He is now.” JJ explained. “He wasn’t when he joined, but I think they decided he was worth it.”

“He sounds incredible.” Tony said.

JJ smiled proudly. “He really is.”

“Who else is on your team?” Tony asked with interest.

“Well, Spencer is the smart one.” JJ started. “Our Unit Chief is usually Jason Gideon, he’s been with the BAU for decades, but he’s on an extended leave at the moment so the current unit chief is Hotch. He was a state prosecutor before joining the FBI. Derek is next, he’s our explosives and obsessive behaviours expert. And finally there’s Penelope, who isn’t technically part of team, but she’s our technical analyst.”

“I get that.” Tony nodded. “We have a forensic scientist and ME who, while not technically being members of our team, still are in all the ways that count.”

“Exactly.” JJ smiled at his understanding. “Who is on your team?”

“Gibbs.” Tony answered straight away. “He’s in charge. An ex-marine – though he would definitely head slap me if he heard me say that. He doesn’t believe in ex-marines.”

JJ frowned in concern. Surely Tony’s boss wouldn’t actually hit him? It had to be a figure of speech, though admittedly not one she had heard before.
“Then there’s McGee,” Tony continued. “He’s the computer guy I was telling you about. Then there’s…” He stopped suddenly, his face falling.

JJ could have kicked herself. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. Paula told me that you recently lost a teammate.”

“Yeah,” Tony’s smile looked forced. “Kate. She was great. Gibbs recruited her from the Secret Service.”

“I’m sorry.” JJ said again. “I can’t imagine losing a member of my team.”

“It’s fine.” Tony told her. “Then there’s Abby, she’s the forensic scientist, and Ducky, who’s the ME.”

“And you were working with Paula this week.” JJ added with a smile.

“Yeah,” Tony winced. “It was a rough case.”

JJ nodded sympathetically. “So she told me.”

“You’ve seen her?” Tony asked with interest. “Is she alright?”

“She’s fine.” JJ told him. “She’ll be in pain for a while, but I think she’s looking forward to the extended rest. She was talking about going to back home to see her parents for a while.”

“Good.” Tony smiled in obvious relief.

There was a few seconds of silence and then JJ spoke up. “So your team’s quite small then. Is that normal for NCIS?”

“Small?” Tony frowned. “Is it? When I first joined NCIS it was just me and Gibbs, then there were three of us for a while, and then four. When I was a detective we usual worked in pairs.”

“It might just be the FBI then.” JJ admitted. “There are usually five or six people in our team and that’s pretty normal for the other teams I know. It wasn’t always like that though. I know when the BAU first started they mostly worked as individuals.”

Tony frowned. “That doesn’t sound like fun. It’s important to have someone to watch your back.”

JJ nodded. “I know my team finds it helpful to run ideas past each other. Half the time it seems as though all they do is discuss their different ideas.”

“They’re profilers though right?” Tony asked. “So they don’t normally collect the evidence.”

“Right.” JJ nodded. “The local law enforcement usually collect the evidence and my team works off it.”

“I always thought profiling looked like fun.” Tony admitted with a bittersweet smile. “Kate, the agent we lost last month, was a trained profiler. It was always interesting to watch her work things through.”

“You said she was Secret Service?” JJ questioned gently. “Was it something she learnt there?”

“I always presumed so.” Tony shrugged.

“So you don’t use profiling then?” JJ asked curiously.
“I’m more of a cop than anything.” Tony’s grin was self-deprecating. “Collect the evidence, follow the evidence, catch the bad guy. What about you?”

“Not really.” JJ replied. “It’s not really my job. The closest thing I come to profiling is sorting through the different requests for assistance and choosing which ones the team can help with.”

Tony winced. “That sounds rough. What do you do with the requests that you can’t help with?”

“We only tend to accept around three big cases a month.” JJ answered. “The rest of the time I pass the cases onto individual agents to read through and write up their recommendations. If it’s a crime involving obsessive behaviours, for example, I send it on to Derek. Each member of the team tends to go consult on two to three cases a day when we’re in the office.”

“That’s a lot.” Tony looked surprised. “For federal agents at least. When I was detective we always had multiple cases that we were working on, but since moving to NCIS we only tend to work one case at a time.”

“You do have a pretty small jurisdiction area.” JJ pointed out.

Tony’s resulting wounded expression was obviously fake. “Ouch.”

“What?” JJ grinned. “It’s the truth.”

“I’ll have you know that our jurisdiction includes over six hundred thousand people, as well as their families.” Tony protested.

“As opposed to the three hundred million people in my jurisdiction?” JJ asked in amusement.

“They’re only your jurisdiction if you’re invited in.” Tony reminded her with a grin.

“Or if the unsub crosses state lines.” JJ defended. “Most of the people under your jurisdiction are overseas.”

“Only half of them!” Tony protested. “The other half are civilians and reservists. And that’s not including the families. So really, only about a fifth of them are overseas.”

“A fifth, huh?” JJ asked. “How did you come up with that number?”

“Well,” Tony started. “If you consider that about fifty percent of military personal is probably married…”

“Less probably.” JJ argued just to be contrary.

“And the average American family contains an average of about four people.” Tony continued as though she hadn’t spoken.

“3.13.” JJ corrected. “Spencer mentioned it the other day.”

Tony glared at her. “Do you want to hear my workings or not?”

“Sorry,” JJ grinned unrepentantly. “Please continue.”

“As I was saying,” Tony shot her a stern look. “The average American family contains approximately four people, perhaps slightly less. So three hundred thousand people, multiplied by four,”
“Or 3.13.” JJ put in.

“Comes out at twelve hundred thousand people.” Tony continued smoothly. “Add in the three hundred thousand unmarried personal and you come out with fifteen hundred thousand people under NCIS’s jurisdiction – regardless of whether or not they are victims or perpetrators of the crime. So the three hundred thousand who are currently stationed overseas are only one fifth of the total number of people under NCIS jurisdiction.”

“Impressive.” JJ told him with a smile.

Tony grinned. “That’s not the only thing I’m impressive at.”

“Is that right?” JJ raised her eyebrows inquiringly. “Well, I look forward to discovering your other talents.”

Tony’s answering smile could almost be described as radiant.

Their food arrived some time later and, after having tried both her and Tony’s dishes, JJ decided that she would let Tony order for her on any future dates to an Italian restaurant – his food, while unpronounceable, was definitely tastier than hers. She slowly ate her meal, enjoying her conversation with Tony too much to put it on hold until after they had finished, and was amazed at how much she was enjoying herself.

Tony was great! He was attractive, charming, funny, kind, smart, and, most importantly when compared to her last few boyfriends, understood her job. JJ laughed in amusement as Tony regaled her with a story of a prank he had pulled on one of his colleagues and couldn’t help but hope that he liked her as much as she liked him. She definitely wanted to go on another date with Tony Dinozzo.

2-2-2
Chapter 3

If Tony had to use a word to describe his date with JJ it would be great. Or fantastic. Or wonderful. Or amazing. Or basically any synonym of those words. He definitely owed Paula a thank you card or something for setting them up.

They had stayed at the restaurant long after they had finished their meals and had only left when the restaurant was closing. Then, in true first date fashion, they had stood awkwardly outside the restaurant trying to decide what to say.

“Well,” JJ had started. “This has been great.”

“Definitely.” Tony agreed with a smile. “We should do it again.”

JJ smiled sweetly. “I’d like that.” She reached into her bag and pulled out a business card, before handing it to Tony. “Here’s my number.”

Tony looked down at the card and tried not to hate the FBI logo on it too much. “Thanks. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

JJ looked delighted. “I look forward to it.”

Tony stepped closer to her and slowly bent down to press his lips against hers, before pulling back. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

It wasn’t a good night for Tony. He fell into bed immediately after getting home, but his sleep was disturbed by nightmares. Most of the nightmares were regulars: Kate being shot, Gibbs, McGee and Abby being shot in Kate’s place, or him still having the plague. But there were some new ones too; Paula being killed by Boone’s lawyer and Tony finding her decomposing body. There was even a dream where JJ was shot in Kate’s place. It was ridiculous! He’d only met the woman that evening and his dreams had already decided to use her against him.

In the end, Tony gave up on the idea of sleep and pulled himself out of bed at four thirty – he’d just drink some extra coffee that day. He pottered around his apartment for a while before going for his morning run.

It was still dark outside, but the street lights made it easy enough to see where he was going. The fresh air, along with the light rainfall that was well on its way to soaking him through, helped Tony to shake off any residual fear his nightmares had left and he couldn’t help but grin into the dark. It was good to be alive.

Particularly when he considered the fact that he was going to ring JJ that day. It was early to call, he knew that, normally he subscribed to the idea of waiting three days before calling but he’d had a great time the night before. It had been the best date he’d had all year, even if she was a feebee.

It wasn’t that Tony hated the FBI, well, okay, he did. But only because he remembered Fornell leaving him on the side of the road in a body bag. Fornell wasn’t the only person that had screwed him over that night, after all, Gibbs had been the one to order him into the body bag to start with, but Tony couldn’t exactly hate Gibbs. Besides, the FBI were smug, arrogant bastards who looked down their noses at NCIS (in much the same way that Gibbs, McGee and Kate looked down on LEOs).
Alright, so maybe half of Tony’s hatred towards the FBI was his way of dealing with his frustrations with his team, but still, they were the FBI!

Except JJ wasn’t smug or arrogant, and she definitely wasn’t a bastard (that he knew of at least) and if anyone dared call her one, he would probably punch them.

3-3-3

Tony was the first to arrive at the office, not surprising given that it was six thirty in the morning, and he took the opportunity to reorganise his desk drawers and take note of anything he needed to stock up on. He was almost out of protein bars which, if they got a big case, could make his life a lot more difficult. Gibbs wasn’t known for being reasonable about things like lunchbreaks or dinner breaks. It was almost as though the man thought the rest of them could live off a steady diet of black sludge trying to pass itself off as coffee like he did.

Once he had finished sorting through his drawers it was still only just past seven, but Tony booted up his computer anyway. He had a lot of paperwork to do, paperwork that Gibbs didn’t like him doing during actual work hours, and now was as good a time as any.

Tony always found the amount of paperwork he was required to do amusing. When he’d originally decided that he wanted to go into law enforcement he hadn’t had any idea just how much paperwork would be involved, which was probably a good thing really. Still, it hadn’t always been like this. The paperwork required from him during his years as police officer seemed infinitesimal compared to the amount he did now as Gibbs’ Senior Field Agent.

First there were the normal reports that any NCIS field agent had fill out, then there were the SFA reports and forms (including requisitioning any equipment the team needed), and finally he had somehow ended up doing most of Gibbs’ paperwork as well. Gibbs still filled out his case reports of course, Tony just did the other stuff. Well, except for his own annual evaluation – he’d put his foot down regarding that.

Tony wasn’t sure who had done Gibbs’ paperwork before he had come along, though he knew that Gibbs must have done it himself at one point. He pitied whoever had received Gibbs’ paperwork back then – the man was a great agent, but his handwriting was barely legible.

It only took Tony ten minutes to complete the first form, declaring and justifying their mileage during the Boone case, and then he moved onto the next one. He was halfway through his fourth form, this one defending McGee’s clumsiness a few weeks earlier when he had dropped and broken a camera, when he heard someone approaching his desk.

“Morning, Tony.”

Tony looked up and grinned at Asher Balboa, one of the other agents who worked in the Bullpen.

“Morning.”

Asher returned his grin cheerfully. “You’re here early.”

Tony shrugged and rolled out his shoulders to try and decrease the tension in them. “Lots of paperwork to do and I definitely don’t want to have to come in over the weekend.”

“You’re off this weekend then?” Asher asked. “We should shoot hoops or something.”

“Sounds good.” Tony agreed. “Unless we get a case of course.”
Asher grimaced. “Yeah, well, here’s hoping that neither of us get a case. I worked last weekend and I think Barb might kick me to the couch if I’m not home to mow the lawn on Saturday.”

Tony grinned mockingly. “That’s what you get for allowing yourself to be tied down.”

“Well,” Asher rolled his eyes. “It’s rough. Sleeping in bed with a beautiful woman every night. Good thing you haven’t allowed yourself to succumb.”

Tony stomped down on his jealousy as hard as he could. There was no reason for anyone to know just how much he would love to succumb to marriage. It was a weakness that he wasn’t willing to reveal to his teammates. He could only imagine how much Kate and McGee would mock him for it. He winced. Would have, past tense. How much Kate would have mocked him.

“Yeah, well, nobody makes me mow the lawn.” He pointed out with a smirk. “And I’ll have you know that I went out with a beautiful woman last night and the last thing on her mind was kicking me to the couch.”

Not that they had gone anywhere near a couch, or a bed, or done anything other than talk over dinner, but Asher certainly didn’t need to know that.

Asher grinned. “What’s her name?”

“JJ.” Tony answered. “And before you ask, yes, she’s hot.”

“My man.” Asher put out a fist for Tony to bump and Tony complied. “You planning on seeing her again?”

“Definitely.” Tony smirked, just the thought of seeing JJ again made him happy.

“You’ll have to tell me how it goes.” Asher commented. “Maybe the two of you can come over for dinner sometime. Barb’s always talking about you needing to find someone.”

McGee snorted disparagingly as he swept past Tony’s desk. “He’d have to date her longer than a week first.”

Tony gritted his teeth in annoyance, even as he smirked. “There’s no need to be jealous, McSingle, you’ll find someone willing to date you eventually.”

Asher was eyeing McGee with dislike. “Right, well, I should get back to my desk. I’ll talk to you later about the weekend.”

“Sounds good.” Tony nodded. He waited until Asher had begun walking away, before turning his attention back to his computer monitor. He really wanted to get the form finished by the time Gibbs arrived.

Gibbs arrived two minutes later, much to Tony’s silence frustration, but thankfully he didn’t demand their attention immediately. Instead, he dropped his gear off at his desk and then disappeared again. Tony had no idea where the man was going, but that was hardly unusual – Gibbs was rarely at his desk. Sometimes Tony wondered what the lead agent did with his time. Even when they didn’t have an active case, and were working their way through cold cases, Gibbs would disappear for at least thirty minutes out of every hour.

Gibbs still wasn’t back by the time Tony had finished filling out the form, so Tony printed off the completed forms, signed them, and, after filing one copy of each form for his own records, delivered them to the appropriate departments. It wasn’t necessary of course, there was an intra-agency mail
system, but Tony knew that the people who received the forms didn’t get much human contact at work and he liked to take some time to chat with them and make their day a little brighter. Hand delivering the forms also insured that they didn’t get lost – a phenomena that happened far too regularly for his liking.

By the time Tony arrived back at the bullpen, Gibbs was back as well, and he tried to slip back behind his desk as unobtrusively as he could. It was no good.

“Where the hell have you been, Dinozzo?” Gibbs glared.

“Sorry, boss.” Tony ducked his head. “Just delivering some forms to people.”

“I don’t see why you can’t just email them, Tony.” McGee put in. “That’s what I do for all my forms. It saves heaps of time.”

Tony rolled his eyes. Sure it saved a lot of McGee’s time, but it meant that Tony had to print out McGee’s reports and get him to sign them, as well as photocopying them and then delivering them.

“Do it on your own time.” Gibbs ordered. “You’re supposed to be working cold cases today.”

Tony nodded quickly. “Got it, boss. Will do.”

Which was a bald-faced lie because, regardless of what Gibbs might think, filling out and handing in work related forms was definitely a work related activity, but there was no reason to rock the boat. Particularly not if they were going to spend the day cooped up in the office with Gibbs.

3-3-3

The morning after her date with Tony, JJ spent the first hour of work wishing that there were more women assigned to the BAU. She wasn’t the only woman of course, but they were few and far between and she had never really clicked with any of them. Well, except for Penelope of course, but it was rare that she had an excuse to visit Penelope’s office.

Here she was, the morning after a fantastic date, and she had no one to talk to about it. JJ imagined that if her desk had been in the bullpen with Derek and Spencer’s she probably would have told them all about it, but it wasn’t. Instead, her desk was shut in her office which, while definitely helpful, was also very isolating. It was lonely, being the only person in the Unit with her job description. She had always imagined that working for the FBI would be the kind of job where your team became your family, and, while she now recognised that as being an overly romantic notion, her team had become a kind of family to her. Except, at the same time she often felt like the odd one out.

She had even, once or twice, considered training to be profiler so that she could fit in better, but then she would remember that it would involve getting into the unsubs heads – something that she wanted to stay clear from. It was bad enough hearing about the horrible crimes they committed without actually trying to dwell on them.

By nine thirty though, JJ was far too busy to feel sorry for herself. Apparently Gideon was considering coming back from his medical leave and, while technically it should be an easy thing for him to do, there were a lot of people who had been delighted that the man was benched. JJ didn’t understand that mind set. Gideon was the most experienced member of the BAU and was a great Unit Chief, though Hotch had been doing a great job too. Gideon was most definitely an asset that they didn’t want to lose any sooner than was necessary. But the higher ups didn’t see the world like that. To them Gideon was a liability, too stuck in the old ways to move into the future, and his
nervous breakdown definitely hadn’t helped.

JJ had no doubt that Gideon would be welcomed back, he had just as many people in his corner as he had against him, but it was her job to put out any fires and smooth down any ruffles. She just hoped that he was as ready as he thought he was because, if Gideon came back before he was ready and had another breakdown, it would be much harder to get him back a second time.

The whole business kept JJ so busy that she forgot to anticipate Tony’s call until she sat down in the BAU meeting room to eat her lunch. When she remembered, she pulled out her phone to check for a message from the man (despite having it on her all day) before clipping it back onto the waist of her skirt in disappointment. She then proceeded to try and talk herself out of her disappointment. After all, it had only been just over fourteen hours since they had parted outside the restaurant (and he had held the door of her taxi open for her, because he was sweet like that). The chances of Tony having called her so early were miniscule. In fact, she would be surprised if he called her that day.

JJ checked her phone again just in case and then sighed. Still no message.

“Alright,” Derek asked as he fell into the seat opposite her. “Who is he?”

“Huh?” JJ asked, faking confusion. Sure she had wished for someone to talk to about Tony, but Derek, and Spencer who was just now sitting in a third seat at the table, were not exactly the sort of people she had been imagining.

“Come on, JJ.” Derek smirked. “Don’t try and lie to us. You know we can see right through it.”

JJ couldn’t help but smile. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’ve checked your phone twice in the last two minutes.” Spencer said quickly.

“I’m waiting for a work call.” JJ defended.

“Which is why you’ve looked disappointed each time?” Derek asked her.

“How long were you watching me for?” JJ asked with a frown.

“Three minutes and twenty seconds.” Spencer answered matter of factually, as though it wasn’t creepy at all.

“But only because we were talking to Hotch outside his office.” Derek explained with an amused look towards Spencer. “It’s not like we were stalking you or anything.”

“What?” Spencer looked horrified by the idea. “No, definitely not. I would never…”


“Just like we know that you’re waiting for a guy to call you.” Derek smirked at her. “So, who is he?”

“Who is who?” Penelope asked as she entered the room. She sat down next to JJ, which would have felt supportive if it wasn’t for the fact that Penelope was the nosiest of all of them.

“JJ’s waiting for a call.” Derek filled her in, then he took a huge bite of his filled roll and leaned back smugly. They both knew that Penelope would do all the hard work for him.

JJ glared at him. “From work.”

“You don’t answer work calls during lunch.” Spencer pointed out. “You always let them go to
voicemail."

“Is it a guy?” Penelope asked excitedly as she unwrapped her lunch.

JJ sighed and admitted defeat. “Yes. I went on a date last night.”

“I knew it.” Derek declared proudly.

“So, who is he?” Penelope asked.

“His name is Tony DiNozzo.” JJ answered. “He’s an NCIS agent.”

“Oooh, a federal agent.” Penelope’s eyes widened with excitement.

JJ shot her friend a weird look. “Penelope, we work with federal agents every day.”

“I know that.” Penelope rolled her eyes. “Still there’s just something dreamy about them.”

“Right back at you, baby girl.” Derek told her fondly.

“So how was the date?” Penelope asked her after exchanging a heated look with Derek. “Did it go well?”

“Well, she checked her phone twice in two minutes before.” Derek said dryly. “So I’m going to guess that the answer is yes.”

Penelope squealed. “That’s great! What’s he like?”

“Hot.” JJ started with a grin. “And smart and funny.”

“Older than you?” Penelope questioned.

“By ten years.” JJ admitted. “Which is quite a lot, I’ll admit, but definitely worth it for this guy.”

“Ten years?” Penelope asked. “Which makes him how old?”

“Thirty seven.” Spencer answered quickly. “Well, unless he’s had a birthday recently or…”

“Spencer’s right.” JJ said before the younger agent could list all the possibilities. “He’s thirty seven.”

“That makes him older than Hotch.” Derek pointed out.

“But not older than Agent Gideon.” Penelope pointed out with a giggle.

“Good thing too.” JJ grinned. “Gideon is definitely too old for me.”

“Damn right he is.” Derek agreed. “He’s almost twice your age.”

“Good thing she’s not dating Gideon then.” Penelope said. “But I want to know more about this Tony.”

“What do you want to know?”

“What does he do for NCIS?” Derek asked curiously.

“He’s a Senior Field Agent in the Major Crimes Unit.” JJ answered.
“And before that?”

“He was a cop.” JJ said with a smile. Derek would like that, he’d been a cop before becoming a federal agent too.

“How did you meet him?” Penelope asked, hardly giving JJ time to breath.

“I didn’t actually.” JJ grinned. “Not until last night at least. My cousin set us up.”

Derek whistled. “A blind date? That’s mighty brave of you.”

“And what was the date like?” Penelope asked. “I want every detail!”

It was like a balm to her earlier loneliness and, during her minute by minute report of the date, JJ couldn’t help but feel a bit silly about her earlier self-pity. Who needed more women in the BAU when she had Penelope, Derek and Spencer?
Chapter 4

Tony spent the drive home from work trying to decide whether or not he should call JJ that evening. Sure he was looking forward to talking to her again, if only through a phone call, but calling within twenty four hours would make him look desperate. The problem was that he had promised JJ that he would call her that day and, if he didn’t call her, he would come across as a jerk. Or, at the very least, as someone who couldn’t be relied upon to keep his word. Neither of which would endear him to JJ. So the question was, did he want to look desperate or unreliable? Neither were particularly great options.

Tony unlocked his apartment and then, after having hung his keys and bag up near the door, carefully made his way through the dark apartment towards the windows so that he could open the curtains. Coming home to a dark house was definitely one of the drawbacks to leaving for work before sunrise.

Once that was done, Tony fished JJ’s business card out of his pocket and set it on his kitchen bench. To call or not to call.

He looked at the clock and, seeing that it was only just past six, decided to postpone the decision for a while. Depending on where she lived, she might not even be home from work yet.

Instead, Tony made himself a cup of tea and then carried it over to the chair that he had daubed his ‘reading chair’. He put the tea on the small table to the chair’s right and then considered the available reading material. Did he feel like reading fiction or non-fiction? A novel or the latest American Journal of Criminal Justice?

The Journal won, mostly because there was an article in it on organised crime that he knew cited his master’s thesis, but partly because he was still smarting from some cutting comments that McGee had made earlier about his intelligence. He wasn’t even sure why he had let McGee get to him, but he couldn’t help but feel that if he had chosen to read the novel he would be proving McGee right. After all, he had only chosen to read ‘Jarhead: A Marine’s Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles’ because the movie was coming out in a few months.

The article entitled, ‘Organised Crime and Corruption’, was very interesting and Tony couldn’t help but be impressed by how accurate it was. Sometimes when he read the articles in the ‘American Journal of Criminal Justice’ he found himself wondering if the authors had any hands on experience. Not only was the article a good read, but it gave him a thrill to see his thesis in the list of citations. It was almost enough make him want to go back and do his PhD like he’d originally been asked to do, though he doubted that they were still interested in paying him to do so. Of course there was no way he would have time to do a PhD while working for Gibbs. Heck, they’d only been working cold cases that day and Gibbs had still refused to let them leave until five thirty. Besides, it wasn’t as though a PhD thesis would make the world any better. He could do more good focussing on his job and catching the bad guys.

As enjoyable as the article was, Tony couldn’t help but be distracted by the thought of the business card sitting on his bench. It took him twice as long to read the article as it normally would of, mostly because he kept getting to the end of a paragraph and realising that he hadn’t taken any of it in. By the time he’d finished the article, Tony knew that he was going to have to read it again after he had rung JJ.

He stood up, carried his empty mug back to the kitchen and put the kettle on again. Then he picked up JJ business card and carefully dialled the number on his cellphone, before stepping away from the
kitchen so the noise of the kettle wouldn’t interrupt the conversation.

“Jennifer Jareau speaking.” JJ answered after four rings.

“Hi, JJ.” Tony started. “It’s Tony Dinozzo.”

“Hi.” JJ sounded as though she was smiling. “It’s good to hear from you. I had a great night last night.”

“Me too.” Tony agreed. “We should do it again.”

“Definitely.” JJ agreed. “When is good for you?”

Tony considered that. The next day was Friday, but that seemed a bit too desperate. Saturday he would be shooting hoops with Asher Balboa and, if past experience was anything to go by, would end up being invited home with him for dinner.

“Sunday?” Tony suggested. “My team is supposed to be off over the weekend so, unless we get a case tomorrow, I can do lunch or dinner.”

“Sunday lunch sounds great.” JJ sounded just as excited as Tony felt. “How about you pick the location this time.”

“Alright if I text it to you?” Tony asked. He wanted to give it some thought.

“Sure.” JJ agreed. “Shall we shall twelve o’clock at the location of your choice?”

“Sounds great.” Tony smiled broadly, despite the fact that she wouldn’t be able to see it. “I’ll see you then.”

“See you then.”

Tony hung up the phone and realised he was smiling like a loon. What on earth had made him think he would be able to concentrate more after having talked to JJ? Now all he could think about was their date on Sunday.

4-4-4

“So did he call?” Penelope asked as soon as JJ stepped off the elevator.

JJ laughed in amusement at the excitement in her friend’s voice. “How long have you been waiting there?”

“Ten minutes.” Penelope answered lightly. “You’re late.”

“Bad traffic.” JJ explained as she pushed open the glass doors that led to the BAU.

“Well?” Penelope asked expectantly. “Did he call?”

“He did.” JJ admitted. “We’re having lunch on Sunday.”

“Ooooh! Two dates in one week.” Penelope was practically bouncing. “He must like you.”

“Well, I hope so.”

“Know so!” Penelope told her firmly. “No man takes a woman out three days after their first date if
he doesn’t like her. Most men don’t even call until the third day.”

“It’ll be four days since our first date.” JJ corrected as they began climbing the stairs towards her office.

“It makes no difference.” Penelope assured her. “The man likes you.”

JJ sighed. “Do you ever wish you could just skip the dating stage, you know, the awkward not sure what to say, worried about being too vulnerable part, and go straight to the committed relationship part?”

Penelope laughed. “Wow, you’ve got it bad. One date and you’ve already decided you want a committed relationship.”

JJ could feel her face heating as he unlocked her office door “He’s just amazing, Penelope, and he gets my job. When he rang me last night he said he was free on Sunday, unless his team got a case. He’ll understand when I have to cancel a date because of work.”

“Unlike Justin douchebag Monroe.” Penelope frowned as she sat down in one of the chairs facing JJ’s desk. “That guy was a jerk!”

Now it was JJ’s turn to laugh. “He wasn’t that bad. He just didn’t understand why I couldn’t work a nine to five job like he did.”

Penelope frowned for a second longer, before her face brightened. “So Sunday lunch, huh? Where are you meeting him?”

“I don’t know yet.” JJ answered, sitting in her chair and switching her computer on. “He’s going to text me.”

“So he’s putting some thought into it then.” Penelope said excitedly. “Why lunch though? Wouldn’t dinner be more date-like?”

“It was my idea.” JJ admitted. “If lunch goes really well, then we have the option of spending the afternoon together and maybe having dinner too.”

Penelope beamed. “You go, girl!”

4-4-4

Tony decided that there was something wonderful about waking up on a Saturday morning and knowing that he didn’t have to go back to work for two whole days. Even better was knowing that he would be shooting hoops with Asher that afternoon and then having lunch with JJ the next day.

By the time Tony arrived at the basketball court where he was meeting Asher he was feeling very accomplished. He’d woken up with a long list of chores that he needed to do (it wasn’t often he got two days off in a row) and he had already managed to finish most of them.

Tony was a few minutes early, and there was no sign of Asher, so he grabbed the basketball from the back of his car and started shooting some hoops on his own while he waited for his friend to arrive.

Asher arrived five minutes later just as Tony dunked the ball from the three point line.

“Nice!” Asher commented with a grin, dropping his own basketball and a water bottle on the side lines. “Let’s see how well you do with some competition.”
Tony raised an eyebrow tauntingly. “We could do that, but first we’d have to find me some competition.”

“Just you wait.” Asher promised. “I’ll have you begging for mercy in no time.”

Tony smirked and started bouncing the ball. “You ready, Asher?”

“Oh, I was born ready.” Asher returned with a grin.

It was fun to play basketball again. Tony hadn’t played for months, not since Kate had died or he had gotten the plague, which meant that he hadn’t played since he’d started running daily. It was nice to see evidence of his newly gained fitness. Even nicer to laugh at Asher who was red faced and puffing within forty five minutes.

“Shut up.” Asher narrowed his eyes at Tony. “At least I’m not going to be forty in three years.”

Tony put a hand on his chest and mimed being shot. “Ouch! It’s not as though you’ll be far behind me. I’m only four years older than you.”

“Four long years during which you’ll be in your forties and I won’t.” Asher pointed out with a grin. “How old is this new girlfriend of yours?”

“JJ’s not my girlfriend.” Tony protested. “We’ve only gone on one date.”

“Yeah, but you said you were going on another date tomorrow.” Asher said, wiggling his eyebrows. “Two dates in four days, that’s pretty serious.”

Tony glared at him. “Are you trying to freak me out?”

“Stop avoiding the question.” Asher told him. “How old is she?”

Tony grabbed the ball off his friend. “Are we going to play another round, or what?”

“She’s young, isn’t she?” Asher hassled even as he followed Tony back onto the court. “How young?”

Tony backed up a few steps and then began bouncing the ball. He dribbled it closer to Asher and, just when the man was about to try and get the ball, twisted around and dribbled past him.

“Thirty two?” Asher asked as Tony bent his knees and took a shot. The ball dropped cleanly through the hoop.

“Nope.” Tony denied as he passed Asher the ball. “Your ball.”

Asher held the ball. “Thirty? Twenty nine?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “She’s twenty seven. Same age as McGee.”

“Twenty seven?” Asher sounded impressed. “That’s ten years younger than you.”

“You don’t say.” Tony returned. “We going to play or what?”

“How did you meet her?” Asher persisted.

“Paula set us up.” Tony answered with a grin. “JJ’s her cousin. Now are we going to play some ball or gossip like a pair of school girls?”
“Always with the sexist comments.” Balboa smirked. “Tina Larsen would be horrified.”

Tony grimaced. Agent Tina Larsen worked in the bullpen with them and she was uptight enough to function as a flag pole. Tony had flirted with her a few times and held a door open for her once and she had decided that he was sexually harassing her. Apparently by holding a door open for her, he was inferring that she was inferior to him or something. There had been a long speech, during which the phrase ‘sex-object’ had stood out the clearest. Not because he was sex-obsessed like Kate and McGee thought he was (or had thought, because Kate was dead now), but because it was just so ridiculous. How did him holding doors open for women somehow interpret into him thinking women were only good for sex?

“If you don’t answer all my questions now I’ll take you home and set Barb on you.” Asher threatened.

“Does that threat include a home cooked meal?” Tony asked slyly.

Asher rolled his eyes. “I should have known that it wouldn’t work on you. Yes, it includes a home cooked meal, you idiot.”

Tony grinned and grabbed the ball of Asher again. “You should pay better attention, Asher. You’re never going to catch up to me if you can’t even hold onto the ball.”

4-4-4

Barb was as lovely as ever and, as he bent down returned her welcoming hug, Tony found himself envying the life his friend had. It was everything that Tony secretly dreamed wished for, though maybe without the three cats.

“So,” Barb started as she led them into the house. “How badly did you beat him, Tony?”

Tony grinned. “It was a slaughter. Your husband is getting old.”

“Still younger than you.” Asher pointed out as they walked in to the kitchen.

Barb laughed. “And you’re both older than me.”

“You’re older than Tony’s new girlfriend though.” Asher told his wife with a wicked smile in Tony’s direction.

“She’s not my girlfriend.” Tony protested as he sat down on one of the bar stools.

“Oh, yes, Asher was telling me that you were seeing someone new, Tony.” Barb looked excited. “What’s her name?”

“JJ.” Tony answered.

“And how old is she?” Barb asked as she began cutting up some carrots.

“Twenty seven.” Asher answered in a gleeful tone.

“Not that you would know it talking to her.” Tony defended. “She’s a FBI agent, not some giggly co-ed.”

“I wasn’t judging.” Barb reassured him. “Asher, why don’t you choose a bottle of wine for us to drink?”
“Sure. Red or white?” Asher asked.


“Is there anything I can do to help, Barb?” Tony asked.

Barb offered him a wide smile. “Why don’t you make a platter for us to nibble at while it’s cooking? Crackers are in that cupboard there, the cheeses, olives and pickles are in the fridge, second and third shelf respectively.”

“Got it.” Tony nodded. “And a platter?”

“Is the third drawer nearest the fridge.” Barb answered. “Asher, when you’ve poured the wine, can you please start cutting up some mushrooms?”

Tony found the platter first and then set about arranging the different foods on it. “Is this real Parmigiano-Reggiano, Barb?”

“I think so.” Barb answered as she added the carrots to the large skillet sitting on the stove. “You can never really tell, but most of the writing on packet is in Italian so I presumed it was. Can you taste the difference?”

“I wish.” Tony laughed, he picked up the packaging again and read the Italian on it. “Well, according to this, it was made in Modena, Italy, so I’m pretty sure it’s the real deal.”

“Yes!” Barb grinned. “It ought to be, with the amount I paid for it.”

“I don’t even want to know.” Asher groaned. “It’s just cheese, smelly cheese at that.”

“It came out of my miscellaneous spending money.” Barb promised him. “You spent yours on basketball tickets, I spent mine on yummy cheese.”

Tony finished the platter with a smile and returned the olive and pickle jars to the fridge. He loved how domestic Asher and Barb were. They were the only couple he knew who had ‘spending money’.

“So, Tony,” Barb starting, returning her wine glass to the bench and beginning to mince the garlic. “Tell us about this JJ.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “We’ve been on one date. That’s it. It’s not a big deal.”

“Don’t believe him.” Asher told his wife. “They’re going on their second date tomorrow.”

“You said she was an FBI agent?” Barb asked. “What does she do there?”

Tony cut himself a slice of cheese to put on a cracker. “She’s the Liaison for their Behavioural Analysis Unit, sort of like their very own Public Affairs Department.”

“That sounds like a big job.” Barb commented, as she began dicing two onions.

“It definitely sounds intense.” Tony agreed. “The Behavioural Analysis Unit works on a lot of really awful crimes, the sort that get people panicked. Her job is to make sure that they stay calm.”

Barb shuddered. “That sounds horrible. I don’t even like hearing about those sorts of things, I can’t imagine being part of the team who deals with them.”
“Probably a good thing you became a kindergarten teacher then, love.” Asher told her with a smile. “No terrible crimes to be found there.”

“Oh, you never know.” Barb grinned. “Just yesterday Timmy Stewart stole Madeline Enright’s pencil.”

“No!” Asher’s eyes widened in exaggerated horror. “How ever did you catch him?”

“Well,” Barb’s eyes sparkled. “There were witnesses. Apparently, both Phil Knight and Abigail Terrace saw him take it. Now, Abigail isn’t a particularly reliable witness, but Phil is as honest as five year olds come. It also helped that I caught him using the pencil that had Madeline’s name on it.”

“Amazing!” Asher declared with a laugh. “Maybe you should come work at NCIS with us. We could use a super sleuth like you.”

Barb tilted her head to the side in consideration. “Thanks, but I think I’ll stick with the kindergarteners. There just aren’t enough super sleuths working in that jurisdiction.”

Tony grinned in amusement as he sipped at his wine. He loved spending time with Asher and Barb. There was just something so authentic and loving about their relationship. It was the sort of relationship that he hoped to have one day. One day, hopefully, he would meet a girl that he could bring around to Asher and Barb’s for dinner and she would be able to enjoy their company with him.
Chapter 5

Tony found it hard to choose where to meet JJ for their second date. Should he take her somewhere formal or casual? Somewhere indoors or outdoors? To a café or a restaurant? By the beach or in town?

He knew it was uncommon for him to be so thrown by something as basic as choosing where to meet a woman, but then JJ wasn’t just any woman. She was the best date he’d had in at least six months, probably longer but he didn’t want to be melodramatic, and Tony couldn’t help himself from hoping that there would be many more dates in their future.

He wasn’t feeling particularly confident about that though. It had taken him a few days to realise it, but the fact that she had wanted to meet with lunch rather than dinner wasn’t a good sign. There was something informal about lunch, JJ was probably trying to show him that she just wanted to keep things casual between them.

Tony had considered taking her to a small café near the beach at Sandy Point State Park, but the forty minute drive was probably way to much of a commitment for lunch. Instead, he arranged to meet her at a small café near the waterfront.

Embarrassingly, choosing what to wear was just as difficult as choosing where to meet her. He didn’t want to wear a suit – that would be weird for Sunday lunch, particularly given the café he had chosen – but he didn’t want to wear jeans either. Instead, Tony decided on a pair of light brown pair of trousers and a cream shirt with the top few buttons undone. It was hardly his best work, but it did suit the occasion.

He arrived at the café a quarter of an hour early, and chose a small table in the outdoor seating out the front, before ordering himself a bottle of water.

It was nice to sit in the sun and Tony slipped his sunglasses onto his nose so he could enjoy it without squinting. He liked September, when it was still warm enough to sit outside and feel the sun, but not so hot that he felt like cowering indoors under his air conditioning all day and he was sure that the dryness of the air was probably great for his lungs.

He wasn’t looking forward to the cold weather descending. It would be his first winter since his lungs had been damaged by the plague and Dr. Pitt had warned him that that the moisture in the air would make his lungs ache. As though winter wasn’t usually bad enough.

The fact that he now had to worry about how the cold weather would affect his body made Tony feel old. Wasn’t it supposed to be old guys suffering from that stuff? But then, he was getting old. He was thirty seven for goodness sake. Ten years older than McGee, five years older than Abby, and seven years older than Kate. Sure he was younger than Gibbs, but not by too much. There were less years between him and Gibbs than between him and McGee, or him and JJ for that matter.

A movement out the corner of his eye made Tony look up and smiled when he saw JJ walking towards him in a blue floral dress. He subtly glanced at his watch and was impressed to see that she was five minutes early. He liked women who were prompt.

“Good morning.” Tony stood up and greeted her with a smile, before leaning forward and kissing her chastely on the cheek. “You look amazing.”

JJ blushed. “Thanks. You don’t look so bad yourself.”
Tony smiled widely and pulled her seat out for her. “What would you like to drink?”

“Cranberry juice, I think.” JJ said, glancing down at the drinks menu in front of her. “Do we have to go in to order? Or will someone come out?”

“We’ll need to go in.” Tony said apologetically. “I’ll go order your juice now.”

“Thank you.” JJ smiled sweetly.

It didn’t take Tony long to order and pay for a cranberry juice and an orange juice for himself, and when he returned JJ was looking through the menu.

“Anything you recommend?” She asked as he sat down.

“I’ve only been here once before.” Tony admitted, picking up his own menu. “I think I had the open steak sandwich.”

JJ looked back at the menu. “Was it good?”

“Very,” Tony nodded, setting down his menu. “I think I’ll have it again.”

“I’ll have it too.” JJ decided, putting her own menu on top of Tony’s. “Should we go order that now?”

“We can probably order it when our drinks arrive.” Tony pointed out.

“Good point.” JJ smiled. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been great.” Tony returned her smile. “It’s rare that we get two days off in a row, so it’s been a nice change. How about you?”

“Good.” JJ answered. “Work has been busy. Our unit chief, who has been on medical leave, has decided that he’s ready to come back, but it’s ruffling a few feathers.”

“I remember you talking about him. Gideon, right?” Tony asked.

“Right.” JJ smiled widely. “Yesterday was nice though, I managed to finish the book I’ve been reading for the last few weeks.”

Tony leaned back in his chair. “What were you reading?”

“Blue Blood.” JJ answered. “It’s the autobiography of a New York cop.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Sounds interesting.”

“It was.” JJ admitted. “But it was a bit too close to my day job for my liking. I only read it because my New Year resolution for this year was to read Time Magazine’s top ten books of 2004.”

“That’s intense.” Tony commented. “How are you going?”

“Well, Blue Blood was number seven.” JJ grinned. “So not too bad. The next one should be a lighter read. It’s a cookbook.”

“A cookbook?” Tony repeated incredulously. “How did a cookbook get to be one of the ten best books of last year?”
“Well, I’m hoping that it’s because it has really good food.” JJ said with a laugh.

“I guess it better. Maybe you could cook one of the recipes for me sometime.” Tony said with his most charming smile.

“Definitely.” JJ agreed. “I wonder whether it has any Italian recipes. Is there anything you don’t like? So that I can keep an eye out for recipes?”

“Tofu.” Tony said immediately. “I’m not really fussy, but I tend to be of the belief that food ought to come with meat.”

“I’m in total agreement.” JJ nodded. “One of my friends from college is vegan, I went to her apartment for dinner once and she served tofu. Now whenever we get together we meet at a restaurant.”

Tony laughed. “Good call.”

Their conversation was halted for a few minutes, as a waitress brought them their drinks and then took their lunch orders. Tony couldn’t help but smile fondly as JJ ordered herself an open steak sandwich. It was rare that he came across a woman who wasn’t afraid to eat a good meal on a date.

“So what did you do yesterday?” JJ asked him, after the waitress had left them alone.

“I played some basketball with a friend of mine.” Tony told her. “He’s an NCIS agent as well and, since we were both off work for the day, we took the opportunity to shoot some hoops.”

“You still play basketball?” JJ asked with obvious interest.

“Only casually.” Tony admitted. “I blew out my knee my senior year of college, well, what would have been my senior year of college if I hadn’t gotten hurt.”

JJ tilted her head to the side. “What does that mean?”

“I told you that I went to college on an athletic scholarship, right?” Tony checked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I was on the verge of going pro when I broke my leg during a game halfway through my senior year.” Tony explained. “It was a nasty break, so I had to rethink my career choice – since pro-ball was obviously out. I could have gone into coaching or something, but I decided I wanted to double major in criminology and become a cop instead.”

“Couldn’t you have joined the police force with a Phys. Ed degree?” JJ asked in confusion.

“I could have,” Tony admitted. “But my doctor said it would take at least a year before I’d be able to run on my leg, so I decided to take that time to study.”

“So you took another year to complete the criminology requirements?” JJ asked.

“Another two.” Tony explained. “It was definitely worth it though. I was a better cop for it.”

“So when did you do you graduate degree?” JJ leant back in her chair.

“A few years later.” Tony answered. “Did you ever say what your masters thesis was on?”

JJ gave him a knowing look, having clearly seen through his less than subtle attempt to change the
“It explored a few different techniques for calming the public during a crime spree.” JJ told him. “I knew by then that I wanted to work for the FBI, so I made sure that my masters would be useful.”

“That does sound useful.” Tony agreed.

“What was yours on?” JJ asked.

Tony hid a grimace, he really needed to change the subject. “Organised crime. It was a topic I was interested in.”

“Well, you are Italian.” JJ’s eyes twinkled.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Yeah, because I’ve never heard that before.”

JJ laughed. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Tony waved a hand dismissively. “So, what do you like to do in your spare time?”

“Well, I read.” JJ answered. “And I run. I like to cook, but not in a particularly time consuming manner. I’d never make pasta from scratch or anything.”

“Fair enough.” Tony agreed. “I certainly won’t judge you. I don’t really cook at all.”

JJ looked surprised. “How can you not cook? What do you eat?”

“A lot of takeout.” Tony admitted with a grimace. “I love a home-cooked meal, but I never learnt how to cook as a kid and I’ve never really had time to learn since. I considered attending a class a few years ago, but then I transferred to NCIS and didn’t have time.”

“I can’t believe you don’t know how to cook.” JJ commented. “Surely you can make some basic dishes.”

“Well, I can do baked beans on toast.” Tony told her. “And I can boil an egg, but nothing more complicated than that.”

“I’ll have to teach you then.” JJ decided.

Tony looked at her in surprise. “Really?”

“Really.” JJ repeated firmly, before looking unsure. “Unless, you don’t want to.”

“That sounds great!” Tony reassured her quickly. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” JJ smiled. “Though, I guess I should warn you, I’m a bit a bit of spastic cook. I set a tea towel on fire once.”

Tony laughed. “I can’t imagine that. You seem so calm and put together.”

“I am,” JJ agreed. “Until I get near a kitchen. Then it all disappears.”

“Well, I look forward to seeing that happen.” Tony told her with a grin.

Their meals arrived a few minutes later and the open steak sandwich was just as good as Tony remembered it being. JJ seemed to enjoy it as well, digging in with gusto, and Tony couldn’t help but
think that JJ was definitely the best date he’d had in over a year.

5-5-5

JJ could hardly believe how well lunch had gone. The café Tony had chosen was lovely, and their steak sandwiches were delicious. JJ had almost not ordered the steak, it was hardly a ladylike option, but in the end she had decided that Tony seemed like the kind of man who wouldn’t mind a woman eating steak. And if he wasn’t, then she probably didn’t want to date a guy like him anyway.

After lunch, JJ suggested that they walk along the waterfront and was delighted when Tony quickly agreed. She was still hoping that their lunch date would continue through to a dinner one.

It was nice, walking alongside Tony. He wasn’t too much taller than her, if they were standing facing each other (and she was wearing flat shoes, like she was now) her eyes came up to about his mouth. He had a very nice mouth, and JJ tried not to dwell on how wonderful their kiss had felt after their first date.

They had only been walking for a few minutes, when Tony smoothly linked his fingers with hers. It was awkward at first, mostly because JJ had never really been a fan of hand holding. She knew it was weird, but her first proper boyfriend had had gross sweaty hands and holding hands with him had often felt like she was holding hands with a hot, wet, fish. JJ shuddered everytime she thought about it.

Still, Tony’s hands were smooth and dry and, after she had managed to stop thinking of Jeremiah Cullinan’s hands, JJ found that she actually enjoyed the feeling of Tony’s fingers interlocked with her own.

“Tell me something about yourself.” Tony asked her after a while. “Something you haven’t told me yet.”

JJ took a minute to consider the many choices. “I want at least three kids.”

Tony laughed. “And by kids, I presume you don’t mean baby goats.”

“You presume right.” JJ agreed. “I’m the youngest of three and I can’t imagine having grown up without my siblings around.”

“I’m an only child.” Tony told her, his tone hard to read. “But I always wanted a brother or sister.”

“So you’re not against having kids?” JJ doubled checked. “I know it’s probably way too earlier to talk about this stuff, but I don’t want to waste your time if you don’t want them.”

“I don’t think I would ever describe this as wasting my time.” Tony commented. “But, no, I’m not against the idea of having children one day.”

JJ hadn’t realised that she was holding her breath until she breathed out in relief. “I’m glad.” She told Tony with a smile.

“Tell me something else about you.” Tony said.

“You first.” JJ grinned.

“Okay,” Tony agreed. “I’m a bit of a movie buff. I particularly love old movies, though I enjoy newer ones as well.”
“What’s your favourite movie?” JJ asked curiously.

Tony shot her an incredulous look. “How could I pick one? I love so many! I love all the Bond films, though Casino Royale was a bit of let-down. I love Hitchcock’s films too.”

“So you like action movies then?” JJ questioned.

“I like all movies.” Tony admitted. “Though, yes, I think I probably enjoy action ones the most.”

“All movies?” JJ smirked. “So you’re a fan of the Disney princesses then?”

Tony rolled his eyes “Okay, I like all movies within reason.”

“Hey!” JJ protested. “Don’t knock the Disney princesses. They’re great company when I’m in bed with the flu.”

Tony laughed. “I’ll take your word for it. What’s your favourite movie?”

JJ considered it. “I think it would have to be a toss-up between ‘When Harry met Sally’ and ‘Pretty Woman’.”

“Not bad.” Tony sounded impressed. “Both Meg Ryan and Julia Roberts make good movies.”

“So does Richard Gere.” JJ laughed.


JJ grimaced. “I take it you enjoyed ‘Analyse This’ then?”


“Well, when you put it like that.” JJ grinned.

“Why didn’t you enjoy it?” Tony asked her.

JJ grimaced. “The language was a bit much for me.”

“Ah,” Tony nodded. “Yeah, I can see how that might be the case for some people.”

“It didn’t bother you?” JJ asked curiously.

“No,” Tony shrugged. “I’ve heard a lot worse, particularly when I was a police detective – from criminals, witnesses, victims and colleagues.”

JJ winced. “I have too, but not often enough for it to be normal for me.”

“Nothing wrong with that.” Tony smiled down at her. “Your turn. Tell me another fact about yourself.”

“I’m a Redskins fan.” JJ told him after a moment of thought.

Tony pulled a face. “Really? They haven’t made it into the playoffs in three years.”

“So?” JJ challenged.

“So I’m impressed that you’re still so committed to their team.” Tony added smoothly.
JJ rolled her eyes. “Sure you are.”

“I am!” Tony protested. “Do you ever watch them live?”

“I try to make it to their games a couple of times a season.” JJ told him. “It’s hard, since I never know when I’ll be called away on a case, but I do my best.”

“There’s a game today, isn’t there?” Tony asked.


Tony looked amused. “I like that you know that.”

JJ considered confessing that she hadn’t been planning on seeing the game, after all, she didn’t want Tony thinking that she had other plans, but then she had an idea.

“You could come over and watch it at my apartment if you wanted.”

Tony looked surprised. “Really?”

“Yes, really.” JJ swallowed nervously, her mouth suddenly dry.

“Sure.” Tony said with a broad smile. “That sounds great.”

JJ squeezed his hand in excitement. “If you wanted, we could head there early and I could give you your first cooking lesson.”

“What would we cook?” Tony questioned.

“Well,” JJ drew out the word. “Usually, I make myself a steak and egg sandwich, along with some homemade salsa to eat with corn chips.”

“You make your own steak and egg sandwiches?” Tony asked in audible awe. “That’s amazing!”

“I’ll take that as a yes then.” JJ laughed.

“Definitely.” Tony agreed quickly. “I love steak and egg sandwiches. Are they hard to make?”

“Not at all.” JJ answered. “You just fry the onion, steak and egg and then put it inside bread. The salsa is easy to make as well.”

“When you offered to teach me to cook I thought you’d be teaching me to make quiches and casseroles, not steak and egg sandwiches!” Tony’s excitement was audible.

“I can teach you to make quiches and casseroles too.” JJ told him.

“Can you teach me to make pizza?” Tony asked her seriously. “With handmade dough and everything.”

“Sure.” JJ laughed. “Do you want to do that tonight or stick with the sandwiches?”

“Another time.” Tony decided after some thought. “I don’t want to mess with your traditional sandwiches.”

5-5-5
Tony tried not to study JJ’s apartment too obviously as she let him through the door. It was a small apartment, though not as small as some that he had seen, and was obviously well-cared for. The way the kitchen and living area were open plan reminded Tony of his own apartment, though it was probably about half the size.

It was a good reminder of what an average federal agent could afford and made Tony all the more thankful for the large sum of money his mother had left him when she had died. He hadn’t even known about the money until he had turned twenty one and received a letter from his mother’s law firm, but it was the only reason that he had been able to stay at college and get his double major. He didn’t spend the money very often, saving it for special occasions, like college, but he did use the interest to supplement his income – which was why he could afford such a nice apartment.

“Can I get you a drink?” JJ asked, walking towards the kitchenette.

“That sounds great.” Tony answered truthfully.

“I’ve got wine, orange juice, and water.” JJ offered. “There’s also tea and coffee if you feel like something hot.”

“An orange juice, thanks.” Tony decided, leaning against the chair nearest the kitchenette. “It’s been awhile since that drink we had with lunch.”

“It has.” JJ agreed, placing two glasses on the bench. “Do you want ice?”

“Always.” Tony grinned.

JJ’s eyes twinkled. “Always, huh? Does that include the middle of January?”

“Perhaps not then.” Tony admitted. “Always, when the temperature is above seventy five.”

“So for about a third of the year then.” JJ laughed as she spooned ice into each of the cups. “That’s an interesting definition of the word always.”

“Smart ass.” Tony grinned.

JJ wiggled her hips. “That’s what they tell me.”

“It’s cute too.” Tony couldn’t help but comment.

“I should hope so.” JJ agreed. “A girl’s gotta have a cute butt. It’s either that, or a winning personality.”

Tony laughed. “Well, you, JJ, have both in spades.”

JJ’s cheeks pinked slightly as she poured orange juice into the glasses. “Why, thank you, Mr. Dinozzo.”

“It’s Agent Dinozzo actually.” Tony corrected loftily. “Or Very Special Agent Dinozzo, if you want to be precise.”

“Really?” JJ asked, her eyes dancing. “Very Special, huh? Well, that is yet to be seen.”
“Ouch!” Tony adopted an injured expression.

“Have an orange juice.” JJ told him unsympathetically. “Maybe it’ll make you feel better.”

Tony laughed as he accepted the glass of orange juice. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” JJ turned on one of the kitchen tap and began washing her hands. “You ready to start cooking?”

Tony eyed the frying pan with trepidation. “I’m not sure.”

“Come on.” JJ rolled her eyes. “It’s not that hard.”

“Speak for yourself.” Tony told her.

JJ dried her hands on a purple towel hanging from the oven. “I’ll be right here the whole time.”

Tony drew himself up and straightened his shoulders. “Alright. What should I do?”

“Well, you should always start by washing your hands.” JJ gestured towards the kitchen sink.

“That I can do.” Tony grinned.

After Tony had dried his hands, JJ directed him to a chopping board and knife she had set out.

“Do you know how to use a knife?”

“Well, that entirely depends what you want me to use it for.” Tony answered. “I know how to throw one and…”

“‘You know how to throw knives?’ JJ interrupted. “Where did you learn to do that?”

Tony shrugged nonchalantly. “I had some friends who taught me after I got out of college.”

“Have you ever had to throw a knife when arresting someone?” JJ asked curiously.

“Not yet.”

“Well,” JJ turned back to the chopping board. “I’ll cut one onion, and you can cut the second one. First, you want to chop off the top of it, but not the tail. Then you peel off the skin.”

Tony watched carefully as she peeled the onion, taking mental notes for when it would be his turn.

“Now,” JJ continued. “Once that’s done, you cut the onion in half, length ways, then take one of the halves and slice it thinly.”

“Why do you keep the tail on?” Tony asked, as he watched her cut the onion into perfect, identical slices.

“To keep the different layers together.” JJ explained. “Then when you’ve sliced down to the tail, you chuck it out. Now you try.”

Tony blanched. “But you haven’t finished your onion yet.”

“The more practise, the better you will be.” JJ told him. “Now, put you left thumb against the tail of the onion and then spread your fingers over the onion.”
Tony attempted to follow her instructions, trying to remember how she had placed her hands.

“Right.” JJ confirmed. “That way, you’re much less likely to cut off your thumb and you can regulate the size of your slices. Now pick up the knife and start slicing.”

It was hard. Tony had always considered himself a co-ordinated man, but apparently that skill didn’t cross over to cutting onions. His first slice was too big, his second too small. When he eventually finished cutting his half of the onion, he couldn’t help but grimace at the sight of his pile of massacred onion slices next to JJ’s perfect ones.

“That’s not too bad for your first time.” JJ reassured him, pushing the second onion towards him.

“Now do this one.”

Tony blinked the moisture out of his eyes. “Are you sure?”

“Definitely.” JJ nodded, moving to stand around the other side of the bench. “And not just because I hate the way onions make my eyes water.”

“Alright,” Tony looked back down at the onion. “But don’t blame me when the onions look like they’ve been attacked by a knife wielding maniac.”

JJ laughed. “Which isn’t too far from the truth, is it?”

“Hey!” Tony pointed the knife in her direction. “Knife wielding I might be, but maniac I am not.”

“Alright, Very Special Agent Dinozzo,” JJ said. “Cut the onion already.”

“So you admit that I’m very special then?” Tony asked as he carefully cut off the head of the onion.

“Well, I’m sure your mother thinks you are.” JJ returned.

Tony tried to prevent his grimace as he peeled off the onion skin. “I’m sure she did.”

JJ winced. “Oh, sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Tony assured her. “She died when I was a nine.”

“That must have been rough.” JJ commented gently.

Tony shrugged uncomfortably. “It was what it was.”

“Sorry.” JJ said again. “I can’t imagine losing either of my parents.”

“Are you close to your parents then?” Tony asked, as he concentrated on slicing the second onion. The slices were definitely becoming more uniformed.

“Very.” JJ answered emphatically. “You remember how I said that I was one of three? Well, my older sister killed herself when I was eleven. After that our family sort of just clung to each other in order to cope.”

Tony stopped slicing. “That sounds horrible. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” JJ echoed Tony’s his own reply a few minutes earlier. “Well, no it’s not. Rosaline should be alive and we should get to see her at family occasions, but it was a long time ago.”
Tony understood that. “Where do your parents live?”

“Herminie, Pennsylvania.” JJ answered. “It’s near Pittsburgh and it’s where they grew up. They met in high-school and, aside from when they went away to college, they’ve lived there their whole lives.”

“Does your third sibling live there as well?” Tony asked, as he began slicing the onions again.

“No.” JJ replied, as she pulled a packet of meat out of a bag and then placed it in the fridge.

“Todd is in the navy actually – a petty officer first class.”

“Really?” Tony grinned. “I’ll have to keep my eye out for him then. Where is he stationed?”

“He’s on the USS Ronald Reagan.” JJ told him. “Those onions look great. If you put them in the frying pan then we can set them aside until we’re ready to cook them.”

Tony did as instructed, before turning back to her. “Now what?”

“Now we start on the salsa.” JJ told him. “I’ll get a red onion which you need to cut the same way.”

Tony nodded confidently. “I can do that.”

“See?” JJ placed a purple onion on Tony’s chopping board. “Cooking isn’t that complicated.”

Tony laughed. “I wouldn’t go that far, the ability to cut onion does not a chef make.”

“True,” JJ acknowledged. “But, so long as you’re making something reasonably basic, cooking is just about taking multiple different skills - all of which are as easy as cutting onion - and putting them together.”

Tony cut of the head of the new onion, before peeling it and then cutting it in half.

“This time you need to do it slightly differently.” JJ told him. “You’re wanting to finely dice it, which means to cut it into small squares. So you’ll want to make sure that you don’t cut into the tail because you need the slices to stay attached for when you turn your slices into squares.”

Tony looked down at the onion, suddenly feeling a lot less confident about the whole thing. Slicing he could do, as of five minutes beforehand, but dicing?

6-6-6

JJ had never taught anyone how to cook before, so she just repeated the same lessons that she remembered from her mother and the chef she had dated four years previously. It seemed to be working. After an hour of working in the kitchen Tony had done all the preparation work for the Steak and Egg sandwiches and made the salsa. JJ just sat on one of the bar stools and gave him instructions, though occasionally she had to demonstrate how to do something.

It was hard to believe that someone could get to the age of thirty seven and know as little about cooking as Tony did. Hearing that his mother had died young certainly explained part of it, but had the man seriously eaten take out his whole life? That sounded ridiculously expensive. There was no way that JJ could afford to live like that. Clearly being a Deputy Special Agent in Charge, or whatever they called it at NCIS, paid well.

Once Tony had finished all the dinner preparations, JJ carried their drinks over to her coffee table and turned on the pre-game coverage.
Tony followed with the salsa and corn chips in hand. “Do you have a mat I can put these on? I wouldn’t want them to mark the table.”

JJ winced as she looked down at the table in question. She didn’t know whether to be pleased that the multitude of stains and watermarks on the table weren’t that obvious, or embarrassed at the state of her table. Weren’t women supposed to be more concerned with the condition of furniture than men?

“I think that ship has sailed.” She admitted. “It’s already covered in marks. I got it from Ikea when I was in college.”

Tony chuckled, as he placed the snacks down on the table. “If only marks could talk.”

“Pardon?” JJ had no idea what he meant.

Tony grinned boyishly. “I’m just wondering what stories those marks could tell.”

“Nothing too exciting.” JJ admitted, choosing a spot on the couch and sitting down. “I’ve never really been a big partier.”

“I find that hard to believe.” Tony grinned down at her. “A pretty girl like you? You must have been invited to every party on campus.”

JJ could feel her face heating at the compliment. “Not every party.”

“Every party worth attending though, I’ll bet.” Tony retorted, his eyes flicking quickly towards the empty seat beside her.

JJ’s chest tightened suddenly, as she was hit with a longing for her relationship with Tony to progress. She’d meant what she said to Garcia. She wished that they could skip over the awkwardness of the first few dates and just get to the comfortable stage - where Tony wouldn’t have to worry about where to sit.

“Well, yeah,” She admitted, stretching out her legs in front of her. “Especially in my senior year. I didn’t go to them all though, and I certainly never hosted any.”

“Good call.” Tony commented, moving to sit on the couch beside her. “Hosting means being responsible for the clean up. Of course, by the time I was a senior I could get the younger members to do most of the clean up for me.”

JJ shifted slightly so that she could see Tony properly. “You were in a frat?”

“Sure was.” Tony grinned proudly. “Alpha Chi Delta, class of 1989.”

“1989?” JJ repeated, doing the maths in her head. “I was in middle school then.”

Tony winced dramatically. “Don’t tell me that. Now I feel like a cradle robber.”

JJ laughed. “You would have been how old? Twenty four?”

“Twenty two.”

JJ tilted her head to the side curiously. “But you spent six years at college.”

Tony looked surprised, almost as though he hadn’t expected her to remember that. “Well, when I say I was class of 1989, what I really mean is that I would have been if I hadn’t blown out my knee.
Technically I was class of 1991, but I left the fraternity when my brothers did in ‘89.”

“Oh, that makes sense.” JJ glanced toward the tv to make sure the game hadn’t started yet, before turning her attention back to Tony. “It must have been hard staying at college when your friends had graduated.”

Tony’s shrug was almost too casual. “Well, I certainly wasn’t the party animal I had been, that’s for sure.”

“So you finished your double major,” JJ said, trying to remember what Tony had told her on their first date. “And then did your graduate degree? Was is a doctorate or masters?”

“Masters.” Tony answered easily. “And I actually took some time off studying in between. I attended the Illinois Police Training Academy and then spent two years working out of Chicago before going back to complete my masters.”

“Is that normal for police officers?”

“No,” Tony shook his head. “I’d say less than half of the guys I worked with as a cop had a college degree, let alone a graduate one.”

“So, why did you do your masters then?” JJ asked curiously.

Tony glanced towards the TV and JJ followed his gaze. The game hadn’t started yet, though it didn’t look as though the opening kick-off was too far away.

“I’d only been a cop for two years when I was shot in the leg.” Tony answered eventually. “The bullet shattered my femur.”

JJ stared down at Tony’s legs. “Seriously?”

Tony grimaced. “Yeah. They put it back together with pins and steel rods, but nobody knew if I’d make a full recovery. So, I decided to go ahead and start my masters while I was waiting for it to heal.”

“So first a knee injury playing basketball, and then a shattered femur?” JJ asked, wincing at the thought. “The same leg?”

“No,” Tony tapped his left leg. “I blew out my left knee, but got shot in the right. What about you? You said went to Philly with a soccer scholarship? Any injuries to speak of?”

“Nothing aside from a few sprains here and there.” JJ answered, leaning forward to select a corn chip from the bowl on the table. “And I don’t go out in the field much as a liaison, so no work injuries either.”

“Really?” Tony sounded surprised. “Maybe I should start looking at a change in career. In the last year I’ve gotten a concussion from being hit in the head by a lamp, been drugged unconscious, had the bubonic plague, and come extremely close to being blown up.”

“The bubonic plague?” JJ repeated in disbelief. “Hasn’t that been eradicated?”

Tony waved a hand dismissively. “It was an isolated case of biological warfare. I’m fine, well, aside from some scarring on my lungs. So you graduated from Pittsburgh with a communications major?”

JJ stared at him, unable to believe that he was just trying to brush off scarred lungs. She was sure that
there was absolutely nothing in her life as interesting as the snippets of stories that Tony had shared so far. She wanted to know more about the plague, and how he’d been shot, and everything else about him! But she supposed it was only fair that he got to learn some things about her as well.

“Yes, and then I did my masters here at Georgetown, before joining the FBI.” JJ explained. “I think I told you that I knew I wanted to work for the FBI when I started my masters? Well, when I was at Georgetown one of the founding members of the BAU, David Rossi, gave a guest lecture and I decided that I wanted to be part of the BAU one day. It took me a few years, but eventually I made it. I’ve been with the BAU for just over a year now.”

“Impressive.” Tony commented. “I imagine that positions in BAU are highly sort after.”

“Yes, and no.” JJ answered. “The BAU has a history of having a high turnover rate. It’s a pretty rough job and a lot of agents leave after a few months. So there’s more opportunities to join the team than most departments. We’re actually down two members at the moment. Our Department Head, Agent, Gideon, is in the process of returning from medical leave, and our most recent addition to the team resigned three weeks ago. She only lasted two months.”

Grief flashed across Tony’s face and JJ’s stomach dropped as she remembered that one of his team members had been killed.

“I’m sorry.” She winced, stretching out a hand to touch his. “I shouldn’t have…”

“It’s fine.” Tony said, his charming grin reappearing in a blink of the eye. “So, you’re a soccer player. Do you play any other sports?”

JJ eyed him for a moment, hardly able to believe how effectively he’d hidden his emotions. If she hadn’t known about his team mate’s death, she probably would have presumed to have imagined his grieving expression. She was glad she’d seen his ability to cover up his emotions now though, it seemed like an important thing for her to know if there were going to be any more dates.

Of course, in order for there to be more dates she needed to ensure that he had a good time on this one. Which, she was pretty sure meant allowing him to change the subject to something brighter and happier.

Tilting her head to the side, JJ pretended to consider the question for a moment. “Well, I’d whip your ass at darts.”

Tony’s surprised chuckle was reward enough.
Tony couldn’t remember having ever enjoyed a date as much as he’d enjoyed his second date with JJ. And he wasn’t just saying that. He’d been searching his mind desperately for a memory of a better date so he could temper his excitement over the awesomeness of JJ, but he couldn’t think of a single one. Not with Wendy, Paula, or any of the other women he had dated.

Which meant he was in trouble, because one wonderful date did not a long term relationship make. No matter how much he wished it did. Regardless of how well he and JJ got along, he knew their relationship had an expiry date. And he knew that the more awesome dates he and JJ had, the harder it would be to survive their inevitable break up.

There was a solution to the problem, of course. There’d be much less collateral damage if he broke up with JJ now. But that wasn’t going to happen. He was an emotional masochist. Or, at the very least, lonely enough to be willing to risk the almost certain trajectory of their relationship and the subsequent broken heart that would result from it.

Tony let his head fall back against the elevator wall with a thunk as the doors slowly opened.

Yeap, he was pathetic.

Tony pushed himself off the wall, pulled back his shoulders, and straightened his suit jacket. He could do this. He could put up with McGee’s insults, Gibbs’ head slaps, and whoever their new temporary agent was. He could…

The elevator doors slowly began to close again, and Tony quickly darted out of the elevator. He returned Balboa’s wave of greeting, before slowly making his way towards his desk. Gibbs and McGee’s desks were empty, so Tony unceremoniously dumped his backpack on the floor, placed his gun in his drawer, and sat behind his desk. Maybe he’d have some time to get some paperwork done before Gibbs arrived.

Turning his computer on, Tony glanced towards the elevator before flinching when he realised someone was sitting at Kate’s desk. And not just someone. Ziva David.

“Good morning, Agent Dinozzo.” Ziva smirked mockingly.
Tony hoped his glare covered the wave of grief that was crashing through him. The last time Ziva David had been in their bullpen had been just after Kate had died. Why would she be back?

“What are you doing here?” Tony asked, unwilling to return her greeting. It was not a good morning. Especially not now that she was here.

“Waiting.” Ziva leaned back in her chair.

Tony raised his eyebrows. “For?”

“To start work.” Ziva was still smirking. “I take it Gibbs did not tell you that I am joining your team?”

Tony stared at her uncomprehendingly. There was no way Gibbs would have signed off on her joining their team. Not after what her partner had been the one to kill Kate. Not after she’d tried to help Ari flee the country. Not after she’d obstructed their investigation.

“Is everyone always this late?” Ziva asked, glancing around pointedly.

Tony glanced towards his watch. “It’s only six thirty.”

“At Mossad we start at five.” Ziva told him smugly.

“Good for you.” Tony rolled his eyes and turned towards his computer. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

“What time should I expect the rest of the team to arrive?” Ziva asked, as though she hadn’t heard him.

“Seven.” Tony answered shortly, quickly typing in the password to his computer. Or earlier, depending on how they were feeling. Personally, he was hoping for earlier. Anything to save him from having to interact with Ziva.
Ziva stood up and moved around her desk so that she could lean back against it. “So why are you here this early, if the team does not start until seven?”

“Because I have work to do.” Tony answered pointedly, his focus still on his computer.

“Work that Agent Gibbs and McGee do not have?”

Tony slid his eyes shut in frustration. “Yes. I am the Senior Field Agent.”

Ziva was moving again, this time closer to him. She leant forward against his desk sensually. It was wildly exotic, and extremely inappropriate. But Tony wasn’t interested in flirting with the woman who had protected Kate’s killer. (And as pathetic as it was, he didn’t want to do anything that might bring forward his and JJ’s expiry date.)

“I thought Gibbs was in charge of the team.” Ziva purred. “Surely he would be the Senior Field Agent.”

Tony leaned back and pushed his chair as far away from Ziva as his cubicle would allow. “Red light, Officer David.”

Ziva looked puzzled. “Red light?”


Ziva’s expression crumbled into one of hurt and vulnerability, but Tony ignored it. If Ziva really was everything she and Mossad claimed that she was, then chances were she was playing with him. And he really wasn’t in the mood.

“Gibbs is the Special Agent in Charge.” Tony explained in his most professional tone. “I am his second in command, also known as the Senior Field Agent.”

Ziva snorted. “You are Gibbs’ second in command? You?”
Tony rolled his eyes. “Don’t play at being an idiot, Ziva. I know you will have read dossiers on us all.”

Ziva eyed him speculatively. “You are more than you appear, Agent Dinozzo.”

“More than my dossier describes me as, you mean.” Tony retorted. Which was good, because that meant that the undercover work he’d done during his first two years as a cop really had been buried as deeply as he’d been promised. He wondered how the FBI had managed to make the information disappear so thoroughly that not even Mossad had been able to find it.

“So,” Ziva started, after having returned to the seat behind Kate’s desk. “What is this work that you have to do?”

Tony stared pointedly at the computer and began to fill out the form that would justify the gas they had used during their last case. He didn’t want to talk to Ziva, and especially didn’t want to see her sitting behind Kate’s desk.

“Agent Dinozzo?”

Tony gritted his teeth. “Officer David, I am working. Please refrain from distracting me.”

“At Mossad we were trained to be able to multi-task.”

“That’s nice,” Tony answered blandly. “Maybe you should go back there.”

“Agent Dinozzo,” Ziva paused. “Tony, I do not understand where your hostility towards me has come from. Surely if we are to work together it would be best for us to put aside any disagreements.”

Tony quickly saved his work, before jabbing at the button that would log him out of his computer. He stood up and grabbed his gun out of his drawer. “I’m going out for coffee.”

Ziva quickly stood as well. “Perhaps I will come with you.”
Tony clenched his hand into a fist, before forcing it to relax again. “No!”

Ziva looked startled at his emphatic refusal, but she recovered quickly. “Is this not a free country, Agent Dinozzo?”

Tony strode towards her angrily, stopping in front of Kate’s desk. “Officer David. I don’t like you. The last time you were here you obstructed my team’s investigation and attempted to help my partner’s killer to flee the country. Even if you have somehow managed to find yourself assigned to this team and gotten Gibbs’ approval, you will never have mine.”

Ziva looked unperturbed, as she stared up at him. A small smirk playing on her lips. “I see, and what exactly do you plan to do about this, Agent Dinozzo? I was not aware that the Director consulted mere Senior Field Agents on personal decisions.”

Tony shrugged. “The good ones do. Morrow did. This director doesn’t.”

Ziva stiffened. “Are you criticising Jenny?”

“Oh, you mean Director Sheppard?” Tony asked pointedly. “At least now we know how you managed to get appointed to this team. And to answer your questions, your first question, I’m not going to do anything. I just want you to know that we will not be friends. We will not even be partners. We will be co-workers and, given that you are completely inexperienced with crime scene investigations, I suspect I will be your Training Officer.”

“Surely Agents Gibbs will be my Training Officer.” Ziva protested quickly.

“Oh, we would both be so lucky.” Tony retorted. “Now, I am going for coffee. Don’t follow me.”

Tony had barely made it three steps towards the elevator before Ziva spoke again.

“You never answered my second question.”

Tony turned back to her with a raised eyebrow. “Training Officer or not, Officer David, I am your Senior Field Agent. I don’t have to answer your questions.”
He strode towards the elevator and forcefully jabbed at the button to summon it.

“Bad morning?” Asher Balboa asked, suddenly appearing beside him.

Tony ran a hand through his hair as he turned to look at his friend. “Don’t pretend like you didn’t hear every word of it.”

Asher shrugged a casual acknowledgement. “It was certainly an event to behold. No question what’s going to be discussed around the water coolers today.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” Tony commented as the elevator opened, revealing McGee holding a drinks tray with two coffees.

McGee raised a mocking eyebrow. “Skipping out on work already, Tony?”

“Good morning, Special Agent McGee.” Asher greeted him stiffly.

McGee rolled his eyes. “Morning, Balboa. Tony, you can’t be going out for a coffee run already. It’s only seven. Besides, I bought you a coffee.”

“No thanks, McGee.” Tony answered, stepping into the elevator and ignoring the way Asher stepped in after him. “Officer David might want one though.”

McGee’s eyes widened. “Officer David?”

Tony pushed the button for the ground floor. “She’s sitting at Kate’s desk. Claims to have been made a member of our team.” He tried not to be too pleased when the elevator doors shut before McGee had recovered from his speechless shock.

“That kid is unbelievable insolent for a probationary agent.” Balboa complained. “You know, he could really use a set down like the one you just gave Officer David.”
Tony shook his head. “Gibbs’ idea of hierarchy goes: Gibbs on top, everyone else on the bottom. If I ever lectured McGee, he’d go crying to Gibbs, and then Gibbs would bite my head off. Which would just leave McGee feeling even more superior. Trust me, I’ve already tried.”

“But you don’t think Ziva is the kind to cry to Gibbs?” Asher asked skeptically.

“Oh, she is.” Tony sighed. “And chances are I’m going to get head slapped into the next century for what I just said up there.”

“But you still said it.”

“I was a little overcome with the sight of her sitting behind Kate’s desk to give a rat’s ass.” Tony explained, as the elevator doors opened to reveal Gibbs standing with a coffee in his hand. Damn it, could his timing get any worse?

“Going somewhere, Dinozzo?” Gibbs asked dangerously, as he joined them in the elevator

“Coffee run, boss.” Tony explained, quickly darting out of the elevator “Officer David is upstairs by the way. Seems to think she’s been assigned to our team. I’ll be back up soon.”

The look on Gibbs’ face was totally worth every growl, head slap, and set down he was going to get as retribution.

“You alright, Dinozzo?” Asher asked worriedly, as he easily kept up with Tony’s long strides. “It’s not like you to purposely wind Gibbs up.”

Tony shot his friend a disbelieving look.

“Okay, so it is.” Asher admitted. “But normally it’s because you’re defending your younger teammates from his wrath. Though why you bother, I have no idea.”

“You ever been on the wrong side of one of Gibbs’ rants, Asher?” Tony asked.
“Nope.” Asher answered proudly. “Because I’ve never been stupid enough to accept a position on his team.”

Tony let out a bitter laugh. “Yeah, well, not even insolent probies deserve to have their soul crushed by Gibbs.”

“But you do?”

“Oh, he’s not crushing my soul, Asher.” Tony replied seriously. “I’ve worked for worse men than Gibbs.”

“He might not be crushing your soul, but he’s certainly head smacking you straight into Repetitive Head Injury Syndrome.” Asher retorted dryly. “You ever consider leaving? Finding a better team? A better boss?”

Tony sighed tiredly. “A couple of times. But honestly, who else would take me? Besides, I can hardly leave the team so soon after Kate’s death.”

“Who else would take you?” Asher sounded as though he couldn’t believe his ears. “Tony, you’re one of the best agents NCIS has.”

Tony snorted disbelievingly. “I’m just good at drawing Gibbs’ fire, Asher.” He stopped walking when Asher suddenly grabbed his arm. “What?”

“Tony, you need to get out of your team.” Asher told him urgently. “They’re ruining you, man. Seriously, put in some applications for some of the current openings and see what comes out of it.”

Tony shook off Asher’s hand. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate the sentiment, Asher. But can you imagine how Gibbs would react if he heard that I was looking at leaving? He’d boot my ass out of NCIS in a heartbeat. I can’t just casually look for a transfer. Besides, like I said, I can’t leave Gibbs and McGee now. Not with Kate’s death so fresh.”

“I have no idea how those two have earned any of your loyalty.” Asher muttered. “And you seriously wouldn’t leave? Not even if Officer David gets placed on your team?”
Tony thought about the fury that had rushed through him at the sight of Ziva sitting behind Kate’s death, and of the games she had attempted to play with him. “Maybe, if I had somewhere to go. But we both know that’s not going to happen.”

7-7-7

JJ’s heart leapt in anticipation as the elevator doors opened onto the BAU floor. She’d been dying to talk to Penelope ever since Tony had left her apartment the evening before and had barely managed to restrain herself from calling her friend in the middle of the night.

Stepping out of the elevator, JJ was disappointed to realise that Penelope wasn’t waiting to ambush her with the usual post-date interrogation. Had Penelope forgotten about the date? Was she running late? Had she called in sick?

The explanation came less than a minute later in the form of a serious looking Hotch.

“Good, you’re here.” Hotch greeted her briskly, holding out a file for her to look at. “We’ve got a case. We’ll be flying to Seattle as soon as I can get the team briefed.”

JJ opened the case file, swallowing heavily at the top photo portraying a dead woman’s face. She’d seen that photo before. It’d been one of them multitude of files that had crossed her desk in the last couple of months, but the local FBI bureau had only been looking for a consult. She couldn’t remember who she’d passed the consult off to. She just hoped it hadn’t been one of the files that had been left unconsulted due to their team being two members down.

“He’s killed four women in as many months.” Hotch explained. “A fifth woman went missing four and a half days ago.”

JJ looked up from the file. “Any chance she’s still alive.”

“We’re presuming so, but he’s never kept a victim longer than seven days.”

JJ winced, that didn’t give the team much time to find her.
“The Director has approved Gideon’s return.” Hotch continued. “He’ll be going with us, but there’s still plenty of paperwork that needs to be done to make it official.”

“You want me to stay behind and finish everything up?” JJ asked, already knowing what his answer would be.

“Yes.” Hotch answered, looking vaguely apologetic. “We’ll be working out of the FBI office in Seattle, and they have their own press liaison.

“I understand, Hotch.” JJ assured him. “You won’t need a press liaison and, given that you used to run the Seattle office, you won’t need help liaising with the local law enforcement either. I’ll be more use here.”

Which was all true, but that didn’t mean that there wasn’t some disappointment that came with watching the team leave without her. Being left behind always gave JJ more sympathy for Garcia who never travelled with the team.

JJ spent her morning working through the pile of paperwork that would allow Gideon to rejoin the team, before taking her lunch down to Penelope’s office. She knew Penelope didn’t like leaving her computer when the team was on the case. There was always a chance that one of the team would ring needed urgent information and that, even a few minutes delay, could mean the difference between life and death for someone.

“Hey, Penelope.” JJ pushed open Penelope’s office door, wincing as her eyes adjusted to the dim room lit only by the blue light of the computer screens. “Do you have time for a lunch break?”

Penelope spun her chair around, a broad smile on her face. “Finally! I’ve been waiting for you to come down and tell me about your date all morning!”

JJ grinned as she pulled the spare chair closer to Penelope. “I thought you might have been. I was surprised not to see you waiting for my elevator.”

Penelope pouted. “You know how it goes. All work and no play - especially when there’s the possibility of actually saving someone.”

“I know.” JJ sighed, as she began unwrapping her sandwich. “I actually had this case come across
my desk a few months ago. I can’t help but wonder whether I could have done something more back then.”

“Uh, uh, uh!” Penelope reprimanded, waving a finger. “There’s no point in what ifs. You did what you could with the information you had.”

“And with the team down two profilers.” JJ added. “I can’t even remember whether or not I prioritised this case to be consulted on. I’m glad Gideon’s back.”

Penelope’s eyes widened. “Agent Gideon’s back? Isn’t he still a little..you know?”

“He passed his psych test.” JJ shrugged. “Now we just need the last opening to be filled, preferably with someone who’ll last longer than a few months. We’d only just got Agent Dale up to scratch when she left.”

Penelope wrinkled her nose. “I never liked her.”

“You don’t like any of the agents they hire.” JJ reminded her.

“Because they keep hiring the same agent with a different name!” Penelope complained. “It’s like they look at the team and think, well, we’ve got our token black guy, clearly we need a female agent to fill our quota.”

“Hey!” JJ protested. “Don’t I count?”

“Sure you do.” Penelope leant forward to pat her hand. “But you’re not actually a profiler. Surely you’ve noticed that every agent they’ve hired to fill that position has been a woman with attitude problems.”

JJ frowned. “I thought you’d be all for gender equality or whatever.”

“First,” Penelope raised a finger. “Two women versus four men, is not gender equality. Especially when you consider that three of those men outrank both women.”
“Three women.” JJ protested. “You’re on the team too.”

Penelope shrugged. “I’m team adjacent, which is totally fine. Second,” She raised her second finger. “It’s not their gender I have a problem with, it’s their attitude problem. Why can’t we have a nice female agent who isn’t too busy trying to prove that she’s ‘just as good as the guys’ to actually be a human being?”

JJ shrugged as she bit into the sandwich she’d been holding for most of the conversation. Penelope had a point. “Maybe the next one will be better.”

“Maybe.” Penelope didn’t sound convinced. “But enough of that! How did your date go?”

JJ could feel her smile pulling at her cheeks. “Wonderfully!”

“Wow!” Penelope fanned herself dramatically. “Sparkling eyes and everything. That must have been one hot date.”

“We did make out a little.” JJ admitted, feeling her cheeks heating as though she was a schoolgirl. “And, yeah, that part was definitely steamy. But mostly we just talked.”

Penelope leaned forward eagerly. “About what?”

“Our pasts, our jobs, how many kids we want.” JJ couldn’t stop smiling. “I taught him how to cook, we watched the game.”

“And again I say, wow!” Penelope exclaimed. “You talked about kids? On your second date?”

“There’s not much point dating if we don’t both want the same things.” JJ pointed out. “Anyway, I’m thinking about ringing him after work today to arrange a third date. You don’t think that will seem to desperate, do you?”

Penelope smirked. “Not in a bad way.”
Chapter 8

Tony was relieved when 1700 hours came around without the team having any real leads on the case of the dead sailor in a civil war soldier’s uniform. Hopefully a lack of leads would mean that Gibbs would let them leave at a reasonable hour. The relief felt odd, since normally lack of progress in a case drove him into frustration, but after the day he’d had Tony just wanted to go home.

He’d been disappointed but unsurprised when Gibbs’ had decided to let Ziva stay, but the real trouble had come after that. Apparently Tony’s conversation with Ziva had prompted Ziva to ask Gibbs who her Training Officer would be which had in turn led to Gibbs humiliating Tony in front of the entire bullpen.

It hadn’t been anything Tony hadn’t been expecting. Or anything that had happened many times before. In fact, it had happened often enough that Tony had known what Gibbs was going to say before the rant had event started. Not word for word, of course - Gibbs wasn’t that predictable - but the rant had involved all the usual themes. How Tony had no authority except the authority Gibbs gave him, which was none. How Tony had no right to consider himself superior to Ziva or McGee. How Tony was only on Gibbs’ team because Gibbs let him stay.

None of it was untrue. The entire discipline problem of the Major Case Response Team was due to the fact that Gibbs refused to let Tony exercise his authority as the Senior Field Agent. Tony had never considered himself as being superior to McGee, or Ziva for that matter, it was just that all the paperwork named him their superior. And, yeah, Tony knew full well that Gibbs could throw him off the team if he wanted to.

So, yeah, none of it was a surprise, and none of it was untrue. It was just humiliating to have it yelled at him in front of all the other teams in the building, not to mention that it had been infuriating to see Ziva smirking smugly at him from being Gibbs’ back. McGee hadn’t been smirking at the time, he was still too scared of Gibbs to risk that, but he’d spent the rest of the day being even more insubordinate than usual.

Tony stared at his computer screen blankly, not even attempting to read the information that was being displayed. The conversation he’d had with Asher that morning had been circling his mind all day. He’d never seriously considered leaving the team before, at least not for long, but now the thought was refusing to leave him in peace.

He didn’t think he could work with Ziva. Not when every time he saw her he remembered the way she had protected Ari. And especially not when he could see how much she was trying to manipulate them all now. How could he trust her watch his back?
“Alright,” Gibbs’ said suddenly. “Go home.”

Tony startled into action, quickly starting the motions to turn his computer off and beginning to gather up the things he wanted to take home.

“What’s the rush, Tony?” McGee asked, when Tony had stood up and was slinging his backpack over his shoulders. “Got a date?”

“No.” Tony answered flatly, not in the mood to engage in conversation.

“Oh?” Ziva stood up from behind the desk she was using and began to stalk towards him. “Perhaps you would like some company then?”

“No.” Tony answered again, not caring if he sounded rude. He moved out from behind his desk, stepping around Ziva as he did so, and headed for the elevator.

“Tony!” Asher called, as Tony pushed the button for the elevator. “Wait a minute, would you?”

Tony looked across the bullpen to where Asher seemed to be quickly packing up his bag, before checking that no one from his team was attempting to come after him. If they were, he’d take the stairs rather than wait for the elevator.

Thankfully Asher had caught up to him by the time the elevator doors finally opened, so Tony didn’t have to decide whether or not to wait for his friend. The elevator doors closed behind them, just in time for Tony to hear McGee calling out for him to hold the elevator.

“That kid has nerve.” Asher commented, as the elevator began to descending. “Expecting you to wait after the way he’s treated you today.”

Tony slumped tiredly against the elevator wall. “He is what Gibbs has made him.”

Asher snorted. “Does Gibbs not care that he’s destroying any chance of the kid having any kind of career at NCIS?”
Tony glanced sharply towards his friend. “What do you mean? McGee’s skillset would make him an asset to any team.”

“Maybe,” Asher acknowledged. “But no Agent in Charge wants an insubordinate junior agent on their team, and McGee has made it clear that he won’t listen to anyone except Gibbs.”

“He’d follow his Agent in Charge’s orders if he was on a different team.” Tony defended, as the elevator stopped. “It’s not his fault Gibbs doesn’t acknowledge any authority other than himself.”

Asher didn’t look convinced. “If you say so.”

“He’s a probie, cut him some slack.” Tony moved out of the elevator and began heading towards the NCIS car park. It felt strange to actually be defending McGee, especially considering that Tony had spent half the day wishing he could write him up for insubordination.

“Him being a probie is half the problem.” Asher retorted, matching Tony’s stride. “If he’s this bad now, barely one year after becoming a field agent, just imagine him a few years down the track. He’ll be as arrogant and intractable as Gibbs. Except, he won’t have half as much experience or connections as Gibbs so he won’t get away with it.”

Tony sighed, he couldn’t say he disagreed. “There’s nothing I can do. Or didn’t you hear Gibbs this morning?”

“Everyone heard that.” Asher didn’t look happy. “It was a load of bull.”

“Nothing he said was untrue.”

Asher looked angry. “No other Agent in Charge would ever pull a stunt like that. Not even with a probie.”

Tony shrugged defeatedly. “Yeah, well, Gibbs never claimed to be like anyone else.”
“I was serious about what I said this morning.” Asher tone was suddenly fervent. “You need to get out, Tony.”

“Any suggestions?” Tony asked, before stopping in place when he realised Asher wasn’t beside him anymore. He turned towards his friend questioningly. “What?”

Asher started walking again. “You mean you’re actually considering it?”

“Considering being the main word.” Tony cautioned, falling into step beside the other man. “Let’s just say I’m interested to know what the current openings are.”

“You can’t look it up yourself?” Asher questioned. “You’ve been on your computer all day.”

“And risk Gibbs, McGee, or Ziva looking over my shoulder?” Tony shuddered at the thought. “Did you see how closely she was sticking to me today. Observing, my ass.”

“Oh, I saw.” Asher’s lip curled. “That girl is trouble.”

Tony nodded silently. He wondered whether Ziva’s manipulations ought to be a reason to stay and watch Gibbs and McGee’s’ backs instead of an excuse to leave. After all, it didn’t seem like Gibbs’ was going to be watching them.

“As to the openings,” Asher started. “Turner’s about a month and a half from mandatory retirement.”

This time it was Tony who stopped walking in shock. “Turner?”

“Yeah.” Asher turned to face him, his expression sincere. “He’ll be fifty seven next month.”

“You want me to be your boss?” Tony asked in disbelief.

“I can’t think of anyone I’d rather.” Asher answered wholeheartedly.
Tony snorted. “You’re crazy, and you’re even crazier if you think anyone would give the lead of the secondary Major Crimes Response Team.”

“Applications close on Friday.” Asher said, ignoring Tony’s protests.

“Asher, when I asked about the openings I meant for SFA positions, or even just openings for average field agents.” Tony explained patiently.

“Tony,” Asher stressed heavily. “You’d be wasted as an average field agent. Besides, don’t you think you’ve been a SFA long enough? It’s been what, three years?”

“Two and a half.” Tony corrected. “Which is hardly anything compared to how long most agents stay in the position. I haven’t spent any time as an Agent Afloat.”

“Two and a half with Gibbs is the equivalent of ten with any other Agent in Charge.” Asher argued. “Come on, Tony, at least tell me you’ll consider it.”

“And what happens when I apply and don’t get the position?” Tony asked, wincing as an image of an enraged Gibbs popped into his head. “Gibbs’ will decimate me.”

Asher shrugged, apparently unconcerned. “You’ll get the position. They’d be stupid not to give it to you. Worst case scenario, you take all that holiday time you’ve got owing and keep applying until you get a position. Trust me, the higher ups won’t risk letting you go.”

Tony stared at him. “Why aren’t you applying for the position?”

“Tony, I’ve been Turner’s SFA for just over a year.” Asher answered, as though it ought to have been obvious. “Besides, I think I’ll be a better agent for having worked under you.”

Tony scoffed. “Yeah, because that’s worked so well for McGee.”

“Don’t be an idiot.” Asher snapped. “You know you’ve had nothing to do with the way McGee’s turned out.”
Tony looked away. “Maybe if I’d been a better agent McGee wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss me.”

“Bull!” Asher exclaimed. “Maybe if Gibbs wasn’t such an arrogant bastard he would have actually let you do your job and train your team’s probationary agent.”

Tony swallowed heavily. “You really think I could take over from Turner.”

“I know you could.” Asher answered. “More than that, I know that you should.”

Tony let out a deep breath. “I’ll consider it. Can you slip me the information and required forms tomorrow?”

Balboa opened his satchel and pulled out a file with a flourish. “You mean these?”

“Don’t look so pleased with yourself.” Tony rolled his eyes as he accepted the file. “I only said I’d consider it.”

Asher grinned. “Sure.”

“And if I do go ahead and apply and Gibbs finds out, I’m telling him it was your idea.” Tony threatened, as his cellphone began to ring.

Asher laughed unconcerned. “Yeah, just like you dob McGee in to Gibbs everytime he makes a mistake.”

Tony shot his friend a dirty look, before fishing his phone out of his pocket and flicking it open. “Special Agent Dinozzo.”

“Hey, Tony, I hope this isn’t a bad time.” JJ’s voice carried through the phone.

Tony couldn’t stop a pleased grin from spreading across his face. “Hey, JJ. No, not a bad time at all.”

“Oh, great, I wasn’t sure whether you’d be working late on a case or not.”

Tony ignored Asher, turning so his shoulder was facing his friend. “We got a case this morning, but we don’t have any chasable leads at the moment so Gibbs let us off early.”

Asher snorted. “Early? It was nearly five thirty!”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” JJ’s voice was like a balm to Tony’s bad day. “My team are on a case in Seattle at the moment, but I stayed behind to finish up some paperwork. The Director has approved Agent Gideon’s return to active service, but there’s still a lot of paperwork to make it happen.”

Tony waved Asher to go on without him. “Agent Gideon was the one who used to be your Agent in Charge, right?”

“Unit Chief.” JJ corrected, as Asher shook his head stubbornly and stayed put.

Tony rolled his eyes and started walking in the direction of the car park again. He rolled his eyes again when Asher fell into step beside him. “That’s good then.”

“Yeah,” JJ sounded relieved. “Now all we need is one more agent and our team will be at full capacity again.”

“I wish I could say the same about my team.” Tony grumbled. “We got a new agent today.”

“They didn’t give you any notice?”

“None,” Tony groused. “I arrived at work to see the Mossad agent who tried to help Kate’s killer get away sitting behind her desk. Apparently she’s my new partner.”
“What?” JJ asked, after a long pause. “I...just...what?”

“Pretty much my reaction too.” Tony admitted, as he and Asher reached the carpark.

Asher grabbed his arm. “You want to come to dinner, man? Barb wouldn’t mind.”

“A Mossad agent?” JJ asked, at the same time.

Tony considered Asher’s offer. Normally he’d leap at the chance to have dinner with Asher and Barb, especially after the kind of day he’d had. But right now, if he had to pick, he thought he’d much rather spend time with JJ.

Holding a finger up to Asher, and hoping his friend wouldn’t be offended, Tony answered JJ’s question first. “Yep, straight from the Israeli spy agency. Listen, JJ, you wouldn’t happen to free for dinner tonight, would you?”

Asher put his hand to his heart as though he’d been shot. “Bros before hoes, man!”

“Sure,” JJ answered, sounding delighted. “I’d love to.”

8-8-8

JJ hadn’t been sure about ringing Tony so soon after their second date, but she’d gone ahead and done it anyway. Sometimes all the ‘dating rules’ seemed too restrictive. She’d hardly been able to believe it when Tony had asked her out for dinner, especially given that it had sounded as though he’d had other plans. At least, that was what she assumed the man in the background has meant by ‘bros before hoes’.

It was a little nerve wracking to be waiting in the restaurant wearing her work clothes. She’d put a lot of effort into choosing her outfits for her and Tony’s first two dates (and had it only been two dates?!) and she hoped that her work clothes wouldn’t disappoint. Admittedly, he’d probably be wearing his work clothes too. JJ was interested to see whether he dressed more like Morgan or Hotch. Did he go for the open collar shirt or the suit and tie?
When Tony arrived wearing an expensive looking suit, JJ couldn’t say she was surprised. Nor could she say she was disappointed. Wow, could that man pull off a suit!

“Hey, again.” Tony greeted her, with a broad smile.

“Hey,” JJ stood up and was pleasantly surprised when Tony leaned forward for a brief kiss. “It’s good to see you.”

“Yeah,” Tony waited for JJ to sit, before sitting in the chair opposite her. “I’d say ‘long time no see, but it’s only been nineteen hours...’”

JJ laughed. “This is the part where you say that the day has felt long with my absence.” She prompted teasingly.

“Well, it’s certainly been long.” Tony commented, a shadow passing across his expression.

JJ swallowed down a wince as she remembered what he’d said about his new partner. “I’m not surprised.”

“I don’t think Gibbs had been this mad at me since just after Kate died.” Tony commented, sounding tired.

JJ blinked, that hadn’t been what she’d been expecting. “Why is your boss mad at you?”

Tony shrugged. “I suspect that he’s less than pleased to have Ziva on the team and I’m an easy target. Not to mention that I may have overstepped my authority this morning and reprimanded Ziva for stepping over the line.”

JJ didn’t understand. “Aren’t you the Senior Supervisory Agent?”

“Senior Field Agent,” Tony corrected. “But, yeah, sort of.”

“Sort of?”
“I am on paper, but Gibbs doesn’t see it like that. I think we’re all just probies in his eyes.”

JJ frowned. “That sounds awful.”

“Some days more than others.” Tony grimaced. “Today being one of them.”

JJ wasn’t sure what she ought to say. On the one hand, she and Tony’d had a couple of wonderful dates and she was really starting to think that they might have a future together. However, on the other hand, she hadn’t even known Tony for a week.

“I know it’s none of my business,” She started cautiously. “But have you ever considered transferring to another team?”

Tony’s grimace was instantly replaced with an amused grin. “It’s like the universe is trying to tell me something.” He commented, shaking his head. “Yes, actually. I got a long lecture on the subject from one of my friends this morning. He wants me to apply for a Agent in Charge position that’s just come up.”

“That’s the equivalent of a Unit Chief position, right?” JJ checked.

“Yeah,” Tony confirmed. “I think Asher’s nuts. No way am I ‘Agent in Charge’ material.”

JJ seriously doubted that was true. “I can’t really comment, since I’ve never actually seen you in a work situation.” She admitted. “But I can tell you that Paula told me that you were one of the best agents at NCIS.”

Tony looked suspicious. “Paula said that? Are you sure?”

JJ rolled her eyes. “Yes, I’m sure. It was one of the first things she told me about you.”

Tony didn’t looked convinced. “She was probably just exaggerating so that you’d agree to go out with me.”
“Somehow I doubt that.” JJ shook her head in amusement. “So are you going to apply for the position?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” Tony admitted, looking tired. “Probably not. If I apply, Gibbs will find out and he’ll make my life miserable.”

“As opposed to how much you’re enjoying your life right now?” JJ asked, before wincing when she realised how pushy she sounded. “Sorry, I shouldn’t be…”

“No, it’s fine. Don’t apologise.” Tony rubbed a hand across his face. “Your point is a valid one.”

“Still, you didn’t ask me out to dinner so I could tell you what you should do.” JJ pointed out. “If I was you I’d be more interested in distracting myself that rehashing my day.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“Well then,” JJ searched her mind for an alternative topic of conversation. “What do you want me to teach you to cook next?”

Tony’s smile was quick and somehow managed to chase away all the tiredness from his expression. “Pizza!”

JJ laughed. “Aren’t you supposed to be some Italian expert on things? I don’t know if my pizza is up to your standards.”
Chapter 9

JJ was relieved when she heard that the team had managed to identify and arrest the unsub before he’d been able to kill Heather Woodland. Though the speed at which they’d solved the case meant that she’d barely managed to finish the paperwork for Gideon’s return to active service by the time they got back. It seemed ridiculous that there was so much paperwork required that it took the same amount of time to do it as to catch a serial killer.

It was nice to have the team back and, the evening after they returned, Penelope arranged for them all to go out for drinks. Hotch and Gideon both abstained, of course. Hotch because Haley was waiting for him and home and Gideon because he never agreed to do anything fun with team. Which was good really because, as much as JJ respected Hotch and Gideon, it was a lot harder to have a good time with her bosses around.

“So, how’s this new guy of yours?” Morgan asked eventually, shouting over the music.

“She’s been out with him three times in a week.” Penelope answered, before JJ had a chance. “How do you think he is?”

Morgan looked impressed. “Three times?”

“Thursday dinner, Sunday afternoon and evening, and then Monday night.” Penelope answered.

JJ couldn’t help but smile. “We’re going out again on Friday.”

Morgan shook his head in obvious amusement. “The dude must have moves.”

“He’s a charmer.” JJ agreed.

“When do we get to meet him?” Penelope asked eagerly.

“Soon,” JJ promised, hoping that was true. It all depended on how the next few dates went. “How was Seattle?”
“Cold,” Reid complained. “Though surprisingly dry. Did you know that on average it rains in Seattle 158 days a year?”

“I did not.” JJ confessed, with a fond smile. “Not while you were there though, huh?”

“I think we may have met Agent Dale’s replacement.” Morgan announced.

JJ exchanged an amused glance with Penelope. “Let me guess. A competitive woman with attitude?”

Morgan raised an eyebrow. “I’m impressed. How’d you know? Has her transfer request already come through?”

JJ shook her head with a sigh. “No, just an educated guess.” She just hoped this one was more palatable than Agent Dale had been.

Penelope apparently wasn’t content with a disappointed sigh though, because she immediately started off on a rant that sounded remarkably similar to the one JJ had heard on Monday.

Not wanting to hear the speech again, even if she did agree with most of the things Penelope was saying, JJ turned her attention toward the dance floor. It was still pretty early, so there weren’t many people dancing, but there was a couple that caught JJ’s eyes. The guy had brown hair and the girl had blond, and JJ couldn’t help but wonder if that was what she and Tony would look like dancing.

9-9-9

Tony put in his application for the ‘Agent in Charge’ position first thing Tuesday morning. He knew he was rushing the decision, he’d been up half the night updating his resume and completing the required forms, but he wanted to get it in before he could talk himself out of applying.

Except, as the day went on, Tony found himself more and more convinced that leaving was the right decision. So much so that he went into the office early the next morning to look up the other openings and then spent the next few days putting in three other applications.
It felt bizarre to have made up his mind to leave so quickly, but Tony knew it was the right decision. The fact that he felt more hopeful about his life than he had in months told him that. In fact, he couldn’t remember when he’d last felt so optimistic about the world. Every time Gibbs head slapped him, McGee was insubordinate towards him, and Ziva attempted to manipulate him, Tony comforted himself with the knowledge that he wouldn’t have to put up with it forever. It was a relieving thought and a novel one. Tony wished he’d made the decision to leave months ago.

Of course, as Tony’s desire to leave the team grew so did his worry that he might not get any of the positions that he’d applied for. What would he do then? He hadn’t been kidding when he’d told Asher that Gibbs’ would decimate him for even applying - which would make Tony’s working life even more horrible. So Tony would either have to stick it out through hurricane Gibbs or quit and, he couldn’t quite believe he was thinking this, but quitting was looking like the better option.

After all, it wasn’t as though Tony needed his salary to live. Sure his life would be a little less comfortable than he was used to until he found a new job, but he could off the money his mother had left him for a years.

Tony shook his head in wonder. Had he somehow slipped into an alternate dimension? How had he gone from arguing with Asher about the very idea of leaving to being willing to quit NCIS in less than a week before? Though, now that he thought about it, a lot had changed in the last week and a half. Not only had Ziva joined the team, but he’d met JJ and been on three wonderful dates with her. Which, really, shouldn’t have affected his life enough to have him wanting to quit his job, but there was something about JJ that made him feel alive again.

“Dinozzo!” Gibbs growl jerked Tony out of his thoughts.

Tony winced as he turned to quickly face an enraged Gibbs. “Yes, boss?”

“Whatcha got?” Gibbs asked, obviously not for the first time.

“What’s Matthew’s statement checks out.” Tony answered quickly, ignoring the way Ziva was smirking at him from behind her desk. “His credit card was used at Hamodava’s at 1900 hours and the waitress remembers seeing a man matching his description.”

“And?” Gibbs looked unimpressed.

Tony searched his mind for any other relevant details before giving up. “That’s all I’ve got, boss.”
Gibbs scowled. “So you’ve got nothing.”

Tony sighed, it wasn’t nothing. Ruling out suspects was an important step in any investigation and he thought he’d done good work in the hour he’d had back at the office. “Sorry, boss.”

“One of you had better have made some progress by the time I get back.” Gibbs declared, before stalking his way towards the elevator.

Tony watched him leave with a scowl of his own. He had no idea what Gibbs did while the rest of them were working on leads, but he knew that it wasn’t super secret ‘Agent in Charge’ business. The other Team Leads in the bullpen seemed to spend almost as much time behind a desk as the rest of their team.

“What the matter, Tony?” Ziva asked, with a mocking smile. “Upset that Gibbs interrupted your day-fantasizing?”

“Daydreaming.” McGee corrected patiently, as he’d been doing all week.

Ziva shot him an inpatient glance. “I do not understand the difference.”

Tony attempted to block out the noise of their chatter as he turned his attention back to his computer screen. They’d solved the murder of Staff Sergeant Sorrow on Tuesday, finished the paperwork on Wednesday, worked cold cases Thursday, and then been assigned a assault and battery case that morning.

So far all their interviews had dredged up was that Lieutenant Olivia Bale was one of the most hated staff members at Bethesda and that she suspected that her attacker had been someone she worked with. Not entirely unlikely given how awful she was. Unfortunately that meant that Gibbs had them working their way through a seemingly endless suspect list. Which meant checking out a large number of alibis.

Turning his attention the next alibi on his list (apparently Commander Heron had been home with his wife and children - Tony dreaded the awkward conversation that would result in confirming the man’s story), Tony moved to pick up his phone. Blinking in surprise when it began ringing.
“Special Agent Dinozzo.” Tony answered quickly, desperately hoping that the phone call would provide a lead that would prevent him from having to ring a woman and asking him whether her husband really had been with her the night before.

“Good afternoon, Agent Dinozzo,” A vaguely familiar female voice greeted cheerfully. “This is Juliet, from Assistant Director Stewart’s office.”

Tony’s stomach twisted nervously. The only reason anyone from the office of the Assistant Director for Criminal Operations would be ringing him was in response to his applications. Though it seemed far too soon for him to be hearing back about them.

“Director Stewart has asked if you would be available to meet with him this afternoon.” Juliet continued.

Tony swallowed dryly. “Sure. What time?”

“Ten minutes?” Juliet asked. “Sorry, I know it’s short notice, but he’s having a busy afternoon and it’s the only time I can fit you into his schedule.”

Tony couldn’t think of any way that this could be good news. It took time to read through applications and create a short list, time that Director Stewart clearly hadn’t had. Chances were he’d seen Tony’s applications and was calling him into his office to tell him ‘thanks, but no thanks’.

“Tony?”

“Uh, sure.” Tony agreed quickly. “I’ll be right down.”

“Down where?” McGee asked suspiciously, as soon as Tony had hung up the phone. “Who was that?”

Tony’s mind raced to find an excuse. “Just one of the finance guys. I forgot to sign one of the requisition forms I handed in yesterday.”

Logging out of his computer, Tony stood up and quickly strode towards the elevator - desperately
hoping that he wouldn’t meet Gibbs there. Thankfully the doors opened to show an empty elevator and Tony quickly pressed for the floor directly below them. He had no idea why the Assistant Director for Criminal Operations worked a floor below both of the Major Case Response Teams. It just made it all the more easy for Gibbs to ignore the proper chain of command and take all of his issues up with the Director.

Tony wondered whether Gibbs poor working history with Assistant Director Stewart was the reason he was getting the brush off. He’d never put a lot of thought into what it must be like for Stewart to be completely ignored by Gibbs, but now he couldn’t help but feel sorry for the man. He knew what it was like to have subordinate agents running around ignoring your authority while your superiors encouraged it.

Juliet was just as cheery in person as she had been over the phone and, before Tony’d had a chance to make sure his suit jacket was straight, she’d ushered him into the Assistant Director’s office.

Tony had only been in the office a couple of times before, but the Assistant Director was familiar to him. Gibbs might not have been willing to work with the man, but that didn’t mean that Stewart wasn’t regularly seen around the bullpen talking to the other teams. Though, as Tony saw him now, he couldn’t help but notice how old he was looking. Assistant Director Stewart looked at least ten years older than Gibbs and Tony wondered how long the older man had until he reached the age of mandatory retirement.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice, Agent Dinozzo.” Stewart stood up and shook Tony’s hand. “Why don’t you take a seat.”

“Thank you, sir.” Tony answered, with what he hoped was an easy smile.

“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?” Stewart turned around to look out of the large window that looked over the Navy Yard. “I’m hoping it’ll be just as sunny tomorrow. My wife and I will have our grandchildren for the day and it’s a lot easier when I can just take them to the park.”

“You have grandchildren, sir?” Tony asked politely.

“Yes,” Stewart picked a photo frame up from his desk and passed it to Tony. “Three.”

Tony looked down at the photo of three smiling children. The eldest looked about seven, which made it all the more likely that the Assistant Director would be retirement soon. “They look like fun,
“Oh, they are.” Stewart agreed, accepting the photo frame back from Tony and sitting down. “And hard work. It’s like herding cats, or NCIS agents.”

Tony chuckled at the image. “I can only imagine, sir. I can’t say I have much experience in herding children, cats, or NCIS agents.”

“Oh, you do a fair job of herding NCIS agents from what I hear.” Stewart commented with a wry smile. “Especially the grey haired, stubborn bastards.”

Tony blinked in surprise. “I’ve never considered myself as herding Gibbs, sir.”

“There’s two ways of herding agents, Dinozzo.” Stewart leaned back in his chair. “There’s the sheepdog method, where you correll the agents through threats, orders and intimidation.”

“Yes, sir.” Tony agreed.

“And then there’s what you do.” Stewart continued. “You corral agents like I corral my grandchildren - by taking them to the park.”

Tony had no idea where the Assistant Director was taking the conversation. “Sir?”

“I distract them, Dinozzo.” Stewart explained. “I take them to the park. I redirect their energies where they can do the least damage. I draw their fire.” He paused and gave Tony a pointed look. “Just like you do with Special Agent Gibbs.”

Tony wasn’t sure what to say. Did the Assistant Director approve of his way of dealing with Gibbs? Was that why he was going to turn down Tony’s applications? Because Tony was most useful keeping track of Gibbs? Or was Stewart saying that Tony’s alternative method of herding agents was so bad that he would never get a job aside from the one he already had?

Stewart paused again, before continuing. “I see that you have applied for four of our current openings, Agent Dinozzo.”
Tony firmly grounded his foot on the ground to stop his leg from bouncing nervously. “Yes, sir.”

“How long have you worked with Gibbs for now?”

“Four years, sir.”

“And as far as I’m aware you’ve never indicated any dissatisfaction with your team in that time.” Stewart commented. “Is that correct?”

Tony nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“So, what changed?”

Tony swallowed nervously. “Sir?”

“Clearly something has prompted your sudden desire to transfer out of your current role.” Stewart commented. “Or do you simply feel as though it is time to move on?”

“No, sir.” Tony sighed. “I have found working with my team to be unpleasant for some time, sir, but I hadn’t considered leaving until this week.”

Stewart nodded. “So what changed?”

“I can’t work with Officer David.” Tony admitted, his tone more vehement than he’d intended.

“I suspected that to be the case.” Stewart said, though he didn’t look at all upset. “So, Agent Dinozzo, out of the four applications you have submitted, which would be your preference?”

Tony breathed out a rush of air. That was not the response he’d been expecting. “Sir?”
Stewart picked up several files from his desk. “You have submitted four applications. Which position would be your first choice?”

Tony blinked. “Agent in Charge of the secondary Major Crimes Response Team, sir.”

“Can I presume that, if you were given the role, you would approach it differently than Agent Gibbs?” Stewart asked, looking strangely pleased.

“Yes, sir.” Tony assured him, feeling more confused than anything.

“Then you can consider the job yours.” Stewart said evenly. “Director Sheppard signed off on it a few minutes ago.”

Tony stared at him, his head swimming. “Is this some kind of joke, sir?”

Stewart chuckled dryly. “No, Dinozzo. You will start your new position on the 2nd of January, but before you start I need you to accept a temporary assignment as Agent Afloat on the USS Reagan so that we can cross some i’s and dot some t’s. I understand you have an abundance of leave available, but I would ask that you remain in your current role for the next two weeks to give me time to find a temporary SFA to fill your position. You’ll ship out to the USS Reagan the day after you finish up with your current team.”

“Director Stewart,” Tony leaned forward in his chair. “I don’t know what’s going on here, but I know that it would have take you longer than three hours to look through all the applications and choose one.”

“Normally you would be right.” Stewart admitted, giving Tony a searching glance. “But, to be honest with you, I’ve been looking for a way to get you off Gibbs’ team for almost two years now.”

“What?” Tony’s asked, his tone embarrassingly high pitched.

“Agents like me and Gibbs, we’re dinosaurs.” Stewart continued. “Not only because of our age, but also because of how we go about things. Agents like you are the future of this agency.”
Tony couldn’t hold back his scoff. “Agents like me? You mean agents like McGee.”

Stewart grimaced. “McGee’s future in this agency remains to be seen. Which is why the Director and I need you to agree to spending a month and a half afloat. I understand that you’ll return a few days before Christmas.”

Tony didn’t know what to say. They were making him an Agent in Charge and all he had to do was agree to spend a month and a half as an Agent Afloat. Which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing when the alternative was to spend that time working with Gibbs, McGee and Ziva.

“Doesn’t Turner retire end of next month, sir?” Tony asked suddenly, the numbers not adding up.

“He does.” Stewart admitted. “But we’ll make it work.”

“Thank you, sir.” Tony said, a smile stretching his face. “I really appreciate your confidence in me.”

“You’re welcome, Dinozzo.” Stewart was smiling too. “I’m just glad you finally decided to take the leap.”

Tony felt as though he was in moving in a daze as the rode the elevator back up to the bullpen. He’d gotten the job. Assistant Director Stewart actually liked him. He was going to be an Agent in Charge. It was unbelievable.

Of course, reality crashed in soon enough.

“Where the hell have you been, Dinozzo!” Gibbs snapped, stalking towards Tony and slapping him across the head.

“Uh, paperwork stuff, boss.” Tony answered quickly, ducking behind his desk. He couldn’t even it in himself to fake remorse. “What’d I miss?”

“Nothing.” McGee answered glumly. “Except Ziva and I have confirmed four more alibis.”
Tony logged back into his computer and picked up his phone. “Well, here comes confirmation number five.”

9-9-9
Chapter 10

It was hard not to watch the clock on Friday afternoon. JJ had been looking forward to her date with Tony all week, and the knowledge that it was only a few hours away was more than a little distracting. There was more than enough to do though, since Hotch and Gideon had approved Agent Elle Greenaway’s request to join the BAU team and it was JJ’s job to make the transfer happen.

She had to admit that Elle’s resume was impressive. There weren’t many people who managed to become a Supervisory Special Agent before they were thirty, and Elle had done it at twenty eight. But then, all the agents who had preceded Elle had had similarly impressive resumes, as did all the current members of the BAU.

Hotch was only thirty four and he’d been the team’s Senior Supervisory Agent for two years before taking over from Gideon. Reid was technically still too young to be allowed to join the FBI, let alone have three PhDs. Gideon was legendary at the Bureau, and Morgan had made Supervisory Agent at twenty nine and was a regular hand-to-hand instructor at the FBI Training Academy. The BAU was filled with high achievers. The real test for Agent Greenaway would be seeing how she dealt with not being the biggest fish in the pond.

JJ had finished most of the transfer paperwork by quarter to five, so she spent the last fifteen minutes organising her desk so that it would be at least partially tidy when she came in on Monday.

“So, hot date tonight?” Morgan asked, appearing in her doorway.

“Yes, at five thirty.” JJ glanced towards her watch. It was five minutes until five.

Morgan leaned against the doorframe. “That’s cutting it close, isn’t it?”

“He works at the Navy Yard.” JJ reminded him. “So we’re meeting at Portofino’s.”

Morgan whistled. “That’s a nice place.”

“Tony chose it. He’s paying apparently.” JJ smiled wryly. “I’m not arguing. I prefer not to blow my
entire food budget in one night.”

“So he’s got money then.” Morgan commented.

JJ rolled her eyes. “Stellar deduction there, Morgan.”

Morgan chuckled and raised his hands defensively. “Hey, don’t knock my profiling. So, what are you wearing?”

JJ glanced towards the clothing bag that was hanging off a hook on her wall. “None of your business. Now get out so I can change.”

Morgan’s grin was almost predatory. “You know I’m just going to wait downstairs until you come out, right?”

“So long as you don’t stalk me to the restaurant and interrupt my date so that you can try and profile Tony, I don’t care.” JJ told him, pushing Morgan out of her doorway.

“Now there’s an idea.” Morgan exclaimed, his tone filled with anticipation. “Hey, Reid? You busy this evening?”

JJ shut her door in his face. “Damn it!”

It didn’t take long for JJ to change into the tight floral cocktail dress that she’d originally bought to wear at a friend’s wedding the previous year. It was a great dress, and not just because it was one of the only dresses she owned that was formal enough to wear at a restaurant like Portofino’s.

She used a compact mirror to touch up her makeup and apply a darker shade of lipstick than what she usually wore to work, before slipping her feet into a pair of heels. Then, picking up her handbag and the clothing bag that now held her work clothes, JJ let herself out of the office and made her way down to the bullpen where Morgan, Reid and Penelope were waiting for her.

“Wow!” Morgan exclaimed, as Penelope oohed and ahhhed and Reid’s jaw dropped. “Damn, girl!”
JJ smiled fondly, as she came to stop beside them. “It’s all the dress.”

“It most certainly is not!” Penelope denied vehemently. “Look how tiny your waist is!”

JJ glanced down at her flat stomach. “That’s what daily runs do to you.”

“Blah!” Penelope made a disgusted sound. “So not worth it.”

JJ laughed lightly, before narrowing her eyes at Morgan. “You weren’t serious before, right? You’re not actually planning on crashing my date.”

Morgan and Penelope exchanged a glance. “Well, it’s like this,” Morgan smirked. “We’ll leave you alone tonight, if you promise to introduce us to this new man of yours before the end of the month.”

JJ quickly did some calculations. “That’s only two and half weeks away!”

“That’s our offer.” Morgan’s smirk grew. “Take it or leave it.”

JJ sized him up, trying to decide how much of the threat was bluff, before sighing in defeat. Even if Morgan was just bluffing, she doubted Penelope was. This was why people hid new relationships from their colleagues.

“Fine.” JJ yielded, pushing her clothing bag against Morgan’s chest. “But you’re helping me carry this to the car.”

It was almost five thirty exactly by the time JJ walked into the restaurant and, as a young man in a smart black uniform led her towards the table Tony had reserved, she found herself hoping that Tony was already there. She didn’t know whether she’d ever been to such an expensive restaurant before and it was a little intimidating.

JJ was disappointed to be led to an empty table, though she quickly distracted herself with the drinks menu. It was disconcerting not to see any prices on the many, though she supposed that it would
save her from the awkwardness of deciding whether something was too expensive to expect Tony to pay for. Though, given the restaurant she was in, Tony was obviously able to pay for quite a lot. Or at least she hoped he was. It would be ridiculous if Tony was breaking his budget to try and impress her.

“Hey, JJ,” Tony’s voice jerked JJ’s attention away from the menu. “Sorry I’m late.”

JJ looked up, smiling appreciatively at how good Tony looked in his suit. Boy, could the man pull off his formal wear. She stood up to greet him and was pleased to see Tony’s jaw drop as he took in her dress.

“You look amazing!” Tony told her, stepping forward and leaning down to capture her mouth in a kiss. JJ let her hand rest against Tony’s chest as deepened the kiss. It felt so natural to be kissing Tony, as though she’d been doing it her whole life.

A disapproving cough to JJ’s left was enough to have her quickly pulling away from Tony, her cheeks blazing in embarrassment. She couldn’t believe she’d just done that in a public place, let alone a restaurant like Portofino’s. What were they, teenagers?

“Are you ready to place a drinks order, Mr. Dinozzo?” The waiter didn’t look as disapproving as JJ had thought he would, more young and awkward - which made her feel even worse. Talk about inappropriate public displays of affection.

Tony, who didn’t look even slightly abashed by the situation, glanced towards JJ. “You alright with me ordering another wine for you to try?”

“Sure.” JJ answered quickly, trying not to look at the waiter.

“A bottle of Brunello di Montalcino then.” Tony told the waiter, his pronunciation sounding just as smooth as it the other times she’d heard him speaking Italian.

“Yes, sir.”

JJ waited for the waiter to move away, before sitting back down. “Oh, that was so embarrassing!”
Tony sat opposite her, looking more amused than anything else. “I’m sure he’s used to it. Again, sorry for being late. Gibbs was reluctant to let us leave.”

“You have a case?” JJ asked curiously.

“Yeah,” Tony sighed, looking tired. “A lieutenant was knocked over the head when she was walking to her car this morning. She didn’t see their face, but is convinced that it’s one of her colleagues getting revenge for the fact that she’s a horrible human being.”

JJ let out a startled laugh. “Her words or yours?”

Tony smirked. “A bit of both. Anyway, whoever hit her over the head also stole her bag. The popular theory is that the bag was taken as a misdirect so that we’d think it was a random hit and grab. Unfortunately that means that we’re stuck checking out the alibis of all of her colleagues.”

“You said popular theory,” JJ observed. “Do you have another theory?”

Tony leaned back in his chair. “I think it’s worth considering the possibility that the lieutenant’s as paranoid as she is horrible and that it really was just a random attack. I’m considering doing a bit of footwork tomorrow. Asking around to see if there are any delinquent teenagers or homeless people that hang out near the Bethesda Naval Hospital.”

“That’s specific.” JJ noted. “Why teenagers or homeless people? Why not gangbangers?”

“The lieutenant’s injuries are too minor for it to have been a gangbanger,” Tony explained easily. “Not to mention that the payoff is too slim. Attacking a nurse on her way into work? And a navy nurse at that? You’d have to be pretty desperate to bother and too stupid not to realise what a terrible idea it is. Not to mention that the carpark is normally swarming with navy personnel, so the attacker was either patient enough to wait for the perfect moment or lucky enough to get away with it. If the attacker was patient, then the lieutenant was probably right and it was a revenge attack. But if the attacker was lucky, then we’re back to a teenager or a homeless person.”

“That’s impressive.” JJ told him sincerely. “You ever consider joining the BAU?”

Tony laughed. “Nah, though I did get some good news today. I got the Agent in Charge job!”
JJ’s eyebrows rose. “Congratulations! That was quick.”

“I know,” Tony laughed again, though he looked puzzled. “I’m not sure what’s going on really, but I’m not complaining either. I’ll finish off with my current team in two weeks and then spend a month and a half as a temporary Agent Afloat, before starting with my new team in January.”

JJ blinked, that was a lot to take in. “Agent Afloat?”

Tony grimaced. “It’s when an NCIS agent becomes the only form of law enforcement on a ship carrying more than five thousand navy personnel.”

“I know, Tony.” JJ smiled to take any sting out of her words. “Paula spent some time afloat, remember?”

“Oh, right.” Tony looked sheepish. “Sorry.”

“So you’ll be going away in two weeks?” JJ asked, already feeling a sense of loss. Sure they’d only been dating for about a week, but things were going so well. What would happen to their budding relationship if Tony went away?

“Only for a month and a half.” Tony said quickly, reaching across the table to rest his hand on her’s. “And I promise to write.”

JJ couldn’t help the smile that spread across her cheeks. “Really? I mean, I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t want to. We’ve only been on four dates and…”

“Four great dates.” Tony interrupted confidently. “And by the time I leave we’ll have been on at least ten.”

“I’d like that.” JJ’s smile was stretching at her cheeks. “And, uh, speaking of which. I promised some of my team that they could meet you before the end of the month. It was either that or have them crash our date, so I went with it.”
Tony didn’t look concerned. “Sure. What do you want to do?”

“We go out to a club near the Hoover building sometimes.” JJ answered. “We could all meet there.”

“Sounds good to me.” Tony grinned, removing his hand from hers. “Just tell me when and where, and I’ll be there. So long as I’m not caught up with a case.”

“Okay,” JJ promised, drawing her own hand back from where it had been sitting. “I’ll arrange it with the others and let you know. Speaking of a case, do you want backup tomorrow? When you do your questioning?”

Tony looked surprised. “What?”

JJ swallowed down a wince. Had she been too bold? Maybe she shouldn’t have asked. “Well, our team has a rule about never going anywhere on a case without someone to back them up.” She explained as casually as possible.

“You’d do that?” Tony was still looking surprised.

“Of course.” JJ answered quickly. “Besides, it’s not as though spending time with you is a chore. We could have lunch after we’re done.”

“Sure,” Tony said, a smile slowly spreading across his face. That’d be great.”

10-10-10

Tony didn’t think he’d ever enjoyed working a case as much as he enjoyed doing it with JJ. In fact, it hardly felt like work. More like a date that involved a lot of walking and the occasional questioning of locals. JJ was incredible. Not only was she great company, but she was just as good at putting people at ease as Tony was. It was strange to working with a partner who didn’t put people off by intimidating them or by saying something stupid. Though definitely not strange in a bad way.

It took them less than half an hour to figure out who the most likely suspect was - a homeless drunk who’d recently started hanging around the area and then around forty five minutes to find him
slumped against one the pillars that made up the Hospital’s fence. As though that wasn’t easy enough, the man had the Lieutenant’s bag lying beside him.

Tony couldn’t help but stare at the bag in surprise. How was it that simple?

“How did she not notice the smell?” JJ commented quietly. “I think I’d smell this guy coming ten feet away.”

“She had a blocked nose.” Tony remembered. “She said it was hayfever.”

“In October?” JJ asked skeptically.

Tony frowned thoughtfully. “You think she was lying about the blocked nose so that she could try and frame one of her colleagues but still have deniability if we figured it out?”

JJ looked a bit incredulous. “Isn’t that a bit far fetched? If I got knocked over the head by a guy I’d want to make sure that they couldn’t do it to me again.”

“True.” Tony admitted. “Why would she lie about a blocked nose then?”

“Maybe she had a cold but didn’t want anyone to know since she worked at a hospital.” JJ suggested with a shrug.

Which Tony had to admit was a lot more plausible than his first theory. Stepping forward towards the homeless man, Tony swallowed heavily as a wave of odour hit him.

“Excuse me, sir?”

The homeless man turned to face him with a scowl. “What?”

Tony pulled out his ID and showed it to the man. “I’m Special Agent Tony Dinozzo, from NCIS, and this is Special Agent Jennifer Jareau. Can I ask you your name.”
The man turned his scowl towards JJ. “Don’t you have ID too, girly.”

JJ didn’t even stiffen, just pulled out her ID and flipped it open so that the man could see it.

“You’re not NCIS!” The man accused, spitting on the ground beside him. “You’re FBI.”

“Your name please, sir.” Tony requested firmly.

“Toby.” He growled. “What do you want?”

“We’re just wondering where you got that bag.” Tony explained, gesturing towards the bag in question.

Toby followed Tony’s movement, stiffening when he saw the bag behind him. “Don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “So you didn’t hit a woman over the head yesterday before stealing her bag?”

Toby’s guilt was written across his face.

Sighing, Tony stepped closer. “Toby, you’re under arrest for the assault of Lieutenant Olivia Bale. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say and may be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney, if cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed to you.”

In the end it took just as much time to get Toby into a car and then back to NCIS than it had taken find him, which was particularly unfortunately given the odour the man was emitting. It reminded Tony of his days as a beat cop, and definitely not in a good way.

It was a relief to get back to NCIS and lead Toby up the holding cells. The weekend security guys looked confused to see him, and even more confused to see JJ, but her FBI badge got her through the door easily enough.
Once Toby was secured in one of the cells, Tony headed upstairs to hand the closing of the case off to the team that was rostered on for the weekend.

“So this is where you work?” JJ asked, as the elevator opened. “It’s very orange, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.” Tony grimaced. “I suppose your office is painted a more reasonable colour?”

“Grey. Which I’ve always considered to be boring, but if this is the alternative…”

“I’d trade this in for grey any day.” Tony agreed, making his way towards the desks that belonged to the third Major Crimes Response team.

“Agent Dinozzo?” Agent Jones stood up from his behind his desk. “I didn’t think you were working today?”

“I’m not.” Tony reached out to shake Jones’ hand. “Agent Jones, this is Agent Jareau, from the FBI’s Behavioural Analysis Unit. JJ, this is Agent Jones, the Agent in Charge of our third Major Crimes Response Team.”

Jones’ eyebrows rose in obvious surprise, but he offered JJ his hand. “Please to meet you, Agent Jareau.”

“Likewise.” JJ agreed, as she shook his hand.

“We’ve just locked a man named Toby, no surname given, in the holding cells.” Tony explained, as Jones turned to him questioningly. “We found him outside Bethesda Naval Hospital in possession of a bag belonging to my team’s assault victim. I was hoping your team would be willing to process him. The stolen bag is in here.”

Tony offered Jones the plastic bag that he’d used to transport the evidence. It wasn’t exactly proper procedure, but it would have to do.
Jones accepted the bag, before glancing between Tony and JJ. “You’ve got the BAU helping on an assault case? Scratch that, Gibbs’ has the FBI helping him a case?”

Tony shrugged. “JJ’s only helping out unofficially.”

“Unofficially.” Jones repeated disbelievingly.

“Not so much helping out as...accompanying me on a morning walk where we happened to come across a suspect for the case my team is working on.” Tony hedged.

Jones let out a huff of laughter. “You’re on a date!”

“Can we concentrate on the criminal downstairs?” Tony asked pleadingly.

Jones grinned for a few seconds longer, before he suddenly frowned in concern. “Gibbs is going to have your ass for this.”

“So what else is new?” Tony answered, the words sounding more bitter than he’d intended them too. He pasted a smile on his face to try and make up for it. “Besides, what would the rest of you do for entertainment without your daily Gibbs and Tony sideshow?”

Jones’ frown didn’t let up. “You sure you don’t want to process him? Gibbs might be more understanding if you do it.”

Tony snorted. “Like you said, Jones, Gibbs is going to have my ass. An hour’s worth of paperwork isn’t going to change that.”

Chapter End Notes

Just to let you know that I have spent the last week in Queenstown, New Zealand, interviewing for a job - which I got. Hurray! So I'll be moving there in about six weeks (which is a really big deal since I've lived in the North Island of New Zealand my whole life). This means that between packing, Christmas, new job, etc, I may not have a lot of
time to write in the next few months. However, I do have another two and half chapters finished but unposted, so I'll try and post them about once a week.

Thanks so much for all your reviews - it is such a joy to receive them!
Tony felt like a man walking to his own execution when he made his way to his desk on Monday morning. There was no way he was going to get through the day without having his head lopped off by Gibbs, and that was presuming that Gibbs hadn’t been told about Tony’s transfer yet. Once that news got out Tony doubted he’d get away with anything less than being drawn and quartered.

Alright, so he was being a little melodramatic. Gibbs wouldn’t kill him, and he probably wouldn’t even lay a finger on Tony - aside from a head-slap or twenty. But Tony wasn’t looking forward to being chewed out in front of the entire bullpen again - especially since the team that he would eventually be Agent in Charge of would be among those listening. It was going to be hard enough to earn his new team’s respect as it was. Though at least Asher, who would be serving as his SFA, wouldn’t need any convincing.

“Morning, Tony.” McGee greeted cheerfully, from behind his desk.

“Morning.” Tony replied absently, before double taking. It was a rare day that McGee made it into the office before him. Glancing at his watch, Tony noted that it was only 0645. “You’re here early.”

“Yeah,” McGee shook his head wonderingly. “Must have been a good traffic day, I guess. I left at the same time I usually do. Is that why you’re here early too?”

Tony dropped his bag behind his desk and stored his gun in his drawer, before leaning over to switch his computer on. “No, I just have some paperwork to do.”

“But we’re in the middle of a case.” McGee’s forehead wrinkled, like it always did when he was trying to figure something out.

Tony sighed and wondered whether he ought to explain to McGee that the SFA position came with a whole lot of extra paperwork. Who did McGee think filled in all the requisition forms? Gibbs? Or maybe the probie thought that their equipment just magically appeared whenever they needed it.

“You don’t actually expect me to believe that you come in to do paperwork, do you, Tony?” McGee asked accusingly. “Why are you here really?”
Yeah, Tony definitely wasn’t going to bother trying explaining the way of the world to McGee after
that. “I have to write up an arrest I made on Saturday.” He answered brusquely, logging into his
computer.

“Saturday? But we weren’t working Saturday.”

Tony ignored him as he began writing up the events that had led him to arrest Toby, making sure to
include JJ’s involvement. Gibbs’ wasn’t going to like it, but hopefully a jury would.

“Tony!”

Pulling his attention away from the sentence he was writing, Tony turned to look at McGee had
moved to stand in front of Tony’s desk. “What, McGee? I’m trying to work here!”

“I find that very unlikely.” Ziva announced, suddenly appearing next to McGee.

Tony eyed her, not even trying to mask his dislike.

“Tony claims to have arrested someone on Saturday.” McGee filled her in, before turning back to
Tony. “What, did you somehow stumble across a criminal while you were out partying? You do
know that turning you down isn’t actually a criminal offense, right, Tony?”

Tony leaned back in his chair, resting his hands behind his head. “As though anyone would turn me
down. And, no, actually. I arrested the man responsible for the attack on Lieutenant Bale.”

“What?” McGee squeaked, while Ziva stared in surprise. “But…how?”

“How what, McGee?” Gibbs’ voice asked sternly, from behind Tony.

It was all Tony could do not to flinch. Well, he’d known that Gibbs would find out sooner or later.
Ziva was the one to answer. “Tony claims to have arrested the man who attacked Lieutenant Bale, Gibbs.”

“What?!” Gibbs snapped, striding around so that he was standing beside McGee. “Is this true, Dinozzo?”

“I’m afraid so, boss.” Tony admitted, refusing to be cowed by Gibbs’ glare. “I had a hunch about the case, so I went to check it out with a friend on Saturday. We found the guy with Lieutenant’s bag on him and everything. Agent Jones’ team was on duty yesterday, so they processed him for me.”

Gibbs actually seemed to swell with fury. “You took a civilian with you?”

“Nope, an FBI agent.” Tony forced a casual shrug. “It was a date actually.”

“You took some girl to help you arrest someone as a date?” McGee sounded scandalised.

“Why the hell didn’t you call me, Dinozzo!” Gibbs growled.

“It was a Saturday, boss.” Tony explained lightly. “We were off duty. Besides, how was I to know that my hunch would pay off? I didn’t want to waste your time.”

Gibbs didn’t looked impressed. “And this hunch just happened to come to you on Saturday morning?”

“Well, no,” Tony stood up, sick of having three agents towering over him. “But you brushed it off when I mentioned it on Friday, so I went to check it out myself. Just to be sure.”

“And so you went behind our behinds?” Ziva asked, as though Tony had somehow betrayed her.

Tony really didn’t see what gave McGee or Ziva the right to have any part in the conversation. “I don’t see what the big deal is here, Gibbs. I did some extra footwork. I found the guy. I arrested him. Case closed.”
“The big deal, Dinozzo, is that we’re a team!” Gibbs snapped. “Which means that you don’t get to go off and pretend to be John Wayne whenever you feel like it!”

Tony couldn’t help but be a little impressed at Gibbs’ movie reference, not that it made the situation any less infuriating. “This coming from the ultimate John Wayne impersonator? Gibbs, you run off by yourself all the time! At least I took backup.”

“You took a date, Dinozzo.” Gibbs barked scathingly.

“Who just happened to be an armed federal agent! You don’t take anyone!”

“This is my team!”

Tony chuckled bitterly. “No kidding. I’ve only been here four years.”

“So I decide what hunches we’re going to follow, and I decide who goes where and with who!” Gibbs declared. “You want to do things differently, get your own team!”

McGee snorted. “Yeah, right. As though anyone with half a brain would put Tony in charge of a team.”

Tony had had enough. “Firstly, Gibbs, I didn’t just follow a random hunch. I solved our case. Which is what we do here, right? Solving crimes? Or is this whole team just an exercise in stroking your ego?”

“What did you just say to me?!” Gibbs’ face was red.

“You heard me.” Tony answered, crossing his arms. McGee and Ziva both took a step backwards. “What the hell is the matter with you, Gibbs? The case is solved. The bad guy is behind bars. What the hell are you so upset about?”

“It was my case!” Gibbs ground out. “Mine!”
Tony shook his head in disbelief. Sure he’d known that this confrontation was coming, but foresight didn’t make Gibbs sound any less unreasonable. “What does that even matter? We’re not children in a sandpit fighting over who gets the best shovel! Who cares who solves the case, so long as it gets solved in a way that guarantees a conviction?”

“And you think that you arresting a man while on a date will guarantee conviction?” Gibbs scoffed.

“No, I think the fact that we found the bag in the man’s possession with manage that.” Tony retorted. “The fact that I had a respected FBI agent with me won’t hurt either.”

“She can’t be that respectable if she’s dating Tony.” McGee muttered quietly to Ziva.

Tony glared at him. “And secondly, McGee! Yesterday I was offered a transfer to an Agent in Charge position. I accepted. You’re welcome to share your thoughts on the wisdom of the matter with Director Shepard or Assistant Director Stewart.”

“What did you just say?!” Gibbs’ was swelling with rage again.

“You heard me.” Tony answered, crossing his arms.

“You’re my agent, Dinozzo!” Gibbs snapped, slamming his fist against his own chest. “You’re not going anywhere until I say you can.”

Tony chuckled darkly. “Last time I looked, I was an NCIS Agent. Not Leroy Jethro Gibbs’ Agent. I go where the director sends me.”

“You’re leaving?” McGee asked in a weak voice, before flinching away when Gibbs turned and glared at him. “Why?”

Tony considered all the answers he could give. About how he couldn’t work with Ziva; how McGee’s insubordination made him unpleasant to work with; or how Gibbs’ ‘second ‘b’ for bastard’ was really just an excuse for workplace bullying. He wasn’t convinced it was worth it though.

“It’s just time for me to move on, McGee.”
“I’ll see about that!” Gibbs snapped, before turning on heel and storming towards the staircase. Presumably to browbeat Director Shepard into revoking Tony’s transfer.

Tony wasn’t too worried. Even if Gibbs’ managed to get his way, Tony would just quit and find a new job. It wasn’t as though he hadn’t done it before. It would be disappointing though, he was really looking forward to getting the chance to lead his own team.

“You’re really leaving?” McGee asked, sounding almost hurt. “What about the team? What about, uh, Abby?”

Tony spared him with a hard look. He knew what McGee was trying not to say. McGee wasn’t worried about Abby, he was worried about himself. “I’ll still be working in the bullpen, McGee. It’s not like I’m going to work out of the LA office. Well, aside from the month and a half I’ll be spending as Agent Afloat, but I’ll be back by January.”

“Hey, Tony.” Asher called, walking towards them. “Congrats, man. Or should I say ‘sir’.”

Tony grinned, and shook his friend’s hand. “Thanks, Asher. Don’t worry, you won’t need to call me sir for at least another couple of months.”

“I do not understand.” Ziva announced, looking expectantly between McGee and Tony. “Why would anyone call you ‘sir’?”

“Tony’s going to be my new team lead.” Asher answered, as though it was obvious. Which, admittedly, it was.

“Yes, I got that.” Ziva waved a hand dismissively. “But why would you call him ‘sir’?”

Asher looked as though he thought Ziva was a few cards short of a deck. “Because that’s what people call their superiors.”

“Gibbs doesn’t make people call him ‘sir’.” McGee argued, before shooting Tony a dirty look. “Though I guess I should have expected that Tony would go on a power trip.”
Tony wasn’t sure how this was his fault. Asher had just been making a joke. It wasn’t as though he’d sat down with his new team and ordered them to all call him ‘sir’. He hadn’t even spoken to them yet.

Asher eyeing McGee with obvious dislike, before turning to Tony. “Do you want to come and meet the team? I heard you say that you won’t actually be starting until January, but it might be nice to have a meet and greet.”

“Sure.” Tony agreed quickly, despite actually knowing the agents in his new team. He suspected Asher was just trying to give him an excuse to get away from McGee and Ziva. An effort which did not go unappreciated.

Following Asher towards the desks where the secondary MCRT worked from, Tony was glad to see that McGee and Ziva weren’t going to follow him. He rolled his shoulders back to try and relax them, before pasting a friendly smile onto his face.

Agent Turner, the agent who Tony would be replacing, was the first to greet him with an outstretched hand. “Morning, Agent Dinozzo. Congratulations on the promotion!”

Tony shook the older man’s hand. “Thank you, sir. I’ll do my best to look after your team.”

“I don’t doubt that.” Turner smiled encouragingly, before turning to face the other members of the team. “Francis, Wardle, I presume you’ve met Agent Dinozzo.”

“Yes, sir.” Agent Amelia Wardle answered crisply and, for a moment, Tony thought she was going to salute him. Which would be understandable, really. Wardle had only been a probationary agent for a couple of months, before which she’d been a navy lieutenant.

“Good to see you again, Agent Dinozzo,” Agent Tony Francis smiled widely, offering a hand for Tony to shake.

“You too, Agent Francis.” Tony agreed, shaking the man’s hand. “I’m looking forward to working with the three of you. I’m sorry you had to find out like this.”
“No worries.” Francis shrugged easily. “It’s not as though it really makes a difference.”

There was an awkward pause, after which Tony quickly excused himself back to his desk. He didn’t want to get in the way of Turner’s leadership of the team, and he definitely didn’t want Gibbs to come down from his discussion with the director to see Tony chatting with his new team. That would undoubtedly lead to unpleasantness.

Not that the day was shaping up to be particularly pleasant as it was.

11-11-11

Tony’s day didn’t get any better.

Gibbs had stormed down the stairs less than ten minutes after he’d climbed up them, clearly unhappy with the result of his conversation with Director Shepherd, and had then proceeded to make them all miserable. And then, if that wasn’t enough, there was Abby.

“What do you mean you’re leaving!”

Tony’s attention startled from his computer screen to the infuriated Abby standing in front of him desk. Almost exactly where Gibbs had stood earlier in the day, which was a little funny really. Especially when you considered the fact that they both had the ‘swelling with fury’ technique down. If Tony hadn’t known better, he’d have thought Abby was even taller than Gibbs. Though, now that he thought about it that could just be the giant platform shoes she was probably wearing.

“Tony!”

“Sorry, Abs,” Tony gave her his full attention. “What’s up?”

“What’s up?” Abby repeated, leaning over his desk. “Don’t you dare ask me what’s up you, you, you, bailer! You can’t leave!”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you in person, Abby,” Tony winced, he’d totally forgotten to take a trip downstairs to tell her, Ducky and Palmer the news. “I should have come down and told you myself.”
“You think I’m upset that you didn’t tell me?” Abby moved around Tony’s desk and whacked him on the arm.

“Ow!” Tony protested, leaning away from her. Unfortunately the partition stopped him from getting very far. “Stop it!”

“Then. Don’t. Leave!” Abby demanded, accompanying each word with another whack to Tony’s arm.

“I’m not leaving you, Abby.” Tony pointed out, as reasonably as he could with a smarting arm and an angry woman towering over him. “I’ll still be working in the building, and you’ll still be processing the evidence I collect. I’ll just be working with a different team.”

“But you can’t leave Team Gibbs!” Abby protested, not looking any less angry. Though at least she wasn’t hitting him any more. “It won’t be the same.”

“Things can’t always stay the same, Abs.” Tony reminded her gently.

Abby leveled a glare at him. “I’ll never forgive you if you leave!”

Tony sighed, why couldn’t these people just be happy for him?

11-11-11

JJ could hardly believe how tired Tony looked when they had dinner on Wednesday night. She’d almost go so far as to describing him as haggard. Not only were the bags under his eyes puffy and pronounced, but his shoulders were slumped as well.

“What happened?” She asked worriedly, reaching up to touch his face. “You look awful.”

Even Tony’s laugh sounded weary. “Thanks, I get that a lot.”
“What happened?” JJ asked again, when it became obvious that Tony wasn’t going to answer her. “Do you have a rough case?”

Tony sat down in his seat and ran a hand through his hair. “We have case, but I wouldn’t exactly describe it as being rough. Things are just a bit...tense around the office at the moment.”

“Because you’re leaving?”

“Yeah,” Tony rubbed at his forehead. “Pretty much no one I work with is happy about it. Palmer’s the only one who isn’t been an ass about the whole thing.”

“Palmer?” JJ couldn’t remember having heard that name before.

“Jimmy’s our Assistant Medical Examiner.” Tony explained. “He’s a good guy.”

“What about your new team?” JJ asked worriedly. “You said they work in the same bullpen as you? What do they think about it all.”

Tony’s expression brightened. “Well, the Senior Field Agent is my best friend, and he was the one who convinced me to apply for the transfer. So he’s pretty chuffed.”

JJ nodded, she remembered Tony have said something about that before. “And the others? There’d be...two other agents, right? You have teams of four?”

“Yeah,” Tony shrugged. “I have no idea what they think. I haven’t had much to do with either of them. They’re both pretty new to NCIS actually. Francis only became a fully fledged field agent six months ago, and Wardle’s only a few months out of FLECT. Asher says they’re looking forward to working with me, but that could just be him trying to make me feel better.”

“You look as though you need it.” JJ commented. “You’ve only got another week and half until you go away though, right?”

“Yeah, they’ll be flying me to the Reagan on the Saturday after next.”
JJ straightened. “You’re going to be working on the USS Ronald Reagan? That’s where my brother’s stationed.”

Tony’s eyes widened. “Really? Talk about a small navy. Of all the American ships. What was his name again? I remember you saying that he was a petty officer.”

“Todd.” JJ answered, her mind racing at the possibilities. “Would you mind if I gave you a care package to give to him?”

“You want me to actually introduce myself to him.” Tony leaned back in his chair. “What would I say? Hey, Todd, I’m the new sheriff in town. I know you guys all pretty much hate us agent’s afloat, but I hope you won’t hate me too much since I’m dating your little sister?”

“Older sister.” JJ corrected. “Todd’s the baby in the family. Besides, it’s not like he’s not going to know it’s you anyway. I wrote to him last week and told him I was seeing an NCIS agent named Tony Dinozzo.”

Tony looked startled. “You wrote to your brother about me?”

JJ blushed, feeling a suddenly self-conscious. “I pretty much tell my family everything.”

“And your father hasn’t flown out to threaten me with a shotgun?” Tony asked. “Did you tell him how old I was?”

“No,” JJ admitted. “I didn’t think it was important. And my dad wouldn’t threaten you with a shotgun. He doesn’t even own a rifle. He’s a democrat.”

Tony’s horrified expression was far too over the top to be real. “A democrat?! Now you tell me.”

11-11-11

Chapter End Notes
Yay, the big confrontation happened! I've been looking forward to posting this chapter for a while. I hope you enjoyed it.

I feel as though I should offer a disclaimer regarding Tony's last comment (just in case it upset anyone). It was just a joke, neither I, nor my head canon for Tony, have a problem with the American Democratic Party.
Chapter 12

Tony never turned down a home cooked meal. Well, apart from that one time the previous week when he’d had to pick between a home cooked meal and dinner with JJ. Not to mention the occasions when Tony had chosen a date with a beautiful woman over dinner with Asher and Barb. So, really, Tony never turned down a home cooked meal unless the alternative involved the possibility of sex. Which meant that when Asher cornered Tony on Friday morning and told him that Barb was expecting him for dinner that night, Tony didn’t put up any resistance.

It was a bit of relief to be invited actually. He’d been wondering if he’d ever be invited again. Despite Asher having been the one to suggest Tony apply to become the Agent in Charge of Asher’s team, Tony wasn’t sure how it would affect their friendship. Would Asher find it awkward to have his boss over for dinner? Would Tony feel uncomfortable about giving orders during the day and then sitting across the dinner table from Asher in the evening?

Which wasn’t something he’d considered before applying for the job, or even before being given it. The thought had only occurred to him the day Gibbs had found out that Tony was leaving, but by then it had been too late to do anything but worry about it. That fact that both Tony and Asher had been too busy helping their teams solve two completely separate murders (and in Tony’s case, too busy surviving Gibbs’ temper tantrums) to really talk hadn’t exactly helped.

(Not that Tony hadn’t had enough to worry about anyway. What with Ziva working at the desk across from him, Gibbs still snapping and snarling, and JJ’s determination to have him meet her colleagues. Not to mention the nerve wracking knowledge that he’d be spending more than a month as agent afloat on the same ship that JJ’s gun wielding brother was stationed on. Meeting a woman’s relatives had rarely gone well for him.)

The invitation to dinner was a soothing balm to Tony’s nerves. But, by the time he pulled his car into the Balboa’s driveway, he was half convinced that Asher had invited him over to give notice for the end of their friendship. Which was stupid. Probably.

“Hey, man.” Asher met Tony at the door with an easy smile. “Good to see you.”

“You too.” Tony followed Asher into the house, and then down the hallway towards the kitchen. “Sorry I’m late. Gibbs didn’t let us leave until just after five thirty.”

Asher snorted. “He was probably hoping dispatch would call at the last minute and give you a new case.”
“I wouldn’t be surprised.” Tony answered. “Hey, Barb.”

Barb turned from the counter, wielding a kitchen knife and a smile. “Tony! How are you? Asher, could you put the kettle on for me please?”

“I’m great.” Tony answered, his smile feeling more natural than it had since he’d seen JJ on Wednesday.

“Liar.” Barb accused, brandishing the knife pointedly. “You look terrible!”

Tony stumbled back melodramatically. “You wound me. Dinozzo’s never look terrible!”

Barb didn’t look impressed. “What has that horrible man been doing to you? Asher, you should have invited Tony over for dinner days ago!”

“I tried.” Asher protested. “But apparently he’d rather go out with JJ than come over and see us.”

“I’m fine, Barb.” Tony tried to reassure her. “Just a bit tired. Gibbs is in a bit of a mood at the moment.”

“Because you’re leaving?” Barb asked, turning back to the bench that she had been working at when he’d arrived. “Come and sit on one of the bar stools so we can talk while I cook.” She ordered. “Asher will make us all a pot of tea.”

Asher groaned. “Barb, you know I hate tea. I’m sure Tony would much rather a glass of wine.”

“Nobody said you had to drink it, Asher.” Barb told him briskly, as she began slicing the onions in front of her. “Tony likes tea.”

“Tony also likes wine.” Asher countered, even as he took Barb’s teapot out of the cupboard.
“Tea is a comforting drink, and Tony needs comforting.” Barb returned.

“Tea sounds wonderful.” Tony admitted, before Asher could argue again. He watched as Barb sliced the onions, comparing her technique to the one that JJ had taught him. “I could slice the onions if you like.”

Barb’s hands stopped moving as she stared at Tony.

Tony spread his hands defensively. “What?”

“Tony, you’ve been coming for dinner for almost three years and you’ve never offered to help cook.” Asher reminded him. “Have you ever sliced an onion before?”

“JJ taught me how the other week.” Tony grinned. “She’s teaching me how to cook.”

“Oh, this I have got to see.” Asher exclaimed. “Give him the onions, Barb.”

Barb didn’t look convinced, but she slid the cutting board she’d been using across the bench and handed Tony the knife. “If you mutilate my onions, Tony Dinozzo…” She started threateningly, before pointedly leaving her sentence unfinished.

Tony carefully spread his fingers over the onion like JJ had taught him, before re-adjusting the knife in his hand and making his first slice. “See? No mutilation. Just a clean slice of onion.”

“I have got to meet this JJ!” Asher declared vehemently. “It’s been, what? Two weeks? And she’s already domesticated you!”

Tony laughed, as he continued slicing the onion. “Two and a half weeks, and I wouldn’t go that far, Asher. She’s just agreed to teach me to cook.”

“So, things are going well with her then?” Barb asked curiously. She had been watching Tony slicing the onions suspiciously, but Tony must have been doing a good enough job because she suddenly moved into action again. She got out a second cutting board, before starting to work on garlic cloves.
“Yes,” Tony couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face. “She’s pretty great.”

“Asher said she helped you make an arrest last week?”

“Yeah, I’d told her I was planning on following up a lead on Saturday morning and she invited herself along.” Tony explained.

“You should have heard Gibbs’ reaction when Tony told him.” Asher told his wife gleefully.

Barb rolled her eyes. “I’m sure Tony didn’t enjoy it quite as much as you did, Asher.”

Tony finished slicing the onion he’d been working on, before moving onto the last one on the board. “It wasn’t so bad.”

“Compared to how he’s been the rest of the week, you mean.” Barb sounded disapproving. “Asher’s told me about how he’s been ranting and raving all week.”

“It’s not as though I didn’t expect it.” Tony shrugged. “In fact, I told Asher last week that Gibbs would make my life hell if I applied for a new position.”

“That doesn’t make it right!” Barb declared. “I don’t know why your director doesn’t put a stop to all his bullying.”

“Probably because she’s harboring a massive crush on Gibbs.” Tony answered. “I’m just glad that she hasn’t revoked my transfer. Gibbs has been up in her office every day this week trying to convince her to make me stay on his team.”

“Really?” Asher placed a steaming tea pot, two cups and the bottle of milk on the bench beside where they were working. “Shepard has the hots for Gibbs?”

“They have history.” Tony explained. “I don’t know any details, but they definitely knew each other before she became director.”
“So she’s a redhead then?” Barb asked curiously. “I remember you saying that Gibbs only dates women with red hair.”

“She sure does.” Asher answered, before groaning. “Oh, man, that’s weird. It’s like thinking about your grandparents having sex.”

Tony snorted. “Gibbs is only nine years older than me, and Director Shepard has got to be younger than him. They’re not even old enough to be your parents.”

“You’re only nine years younger than Gibbs?” Asher’s mouth dropped open. “You’re old!”

“I’m not even forty yet.” Tony complained.

“Does JJ make you feel old?” Asher smirked. “You know, since she’s not even thirty yet?”

“Leave him alone, Asher.” Barb defended Tony, turning on the stove. “Tony, once you’ve finished those onions you can put them in this pan.”

“Alright,” Tony quickly finished the last few slices, before standing up to carry out Barb’s instructions. “And, no, Asher, JJ doesn’t make me feel old.” Most of the time at least.

“I’m glad,” Barb smiled. “We look forward to meeting her. Don’t we, Asher?”

“Absolutely.” Asher agreed quickly.

“Well, I’m shipping out in nine days, so it won’t be until after I come back.” Tony cautioned. Which of course presumed that his and JJ’s fledgling relationship would survive the month and a half apart. He wasn’t holding his breath.

12-12-12
Tony spent most of Saturday putting all his affairs in order for his time afloat. There was a lot to do, and not much time to do it in. He needed to have his mail stopped, let his utility companies know that he’d be out of town for a few months, arrange for a neighbour to come by and feed his goldfish, and pack for a month and a half away. Not that he’d be able to take much. It was going to take a while to get used to living out of a bag. He wasn’t looking forward to it. Especially since he wouldn’t be able to wear suits. He wasn’t sure he even owned enough casual clothing to take with him. It was enough to make him wish that there was an Agent Afloat uniform.

JJ looked surprised when he complained about his dilemma that night over dinner. “You’d actually want to wear a uniform? Have you ever worn one before?”

“Only at every school at I ever attended.” Tony answered. “Which is actually saying a lot. I managed to get kicked out of six different boarding schools until Dad sent me to Military School.”

“You got expelled six times? What did you do?” JJ shook her head. “Wait, no, first I want to know about the uniform thing. I don’t know that I’ve ever met anyone who liked wearing a uniform.”

Tony shrugged. “I wouldn’t say I like wearing a uniform, but at least with a uniform you don’t have to worry about not packing the right clothes. I’ve never been Agent Afloat before. Should I take all jeans and sweatshirts? Would a t-shirt be alright, or should I wear button down shirts instead? Besides, I’m going to be the only one out of five thousand people not wearing uniform. It’ll be like being the only fully clothed person on a nudist beach.”

JJ shook her head. “And suddenly I’m imagining an entire navy ship of naked sailors. Thank you for that. Have you considered asking Paula?”

Tony leaned back with a smirk. “About nudist sailors?”

“Tony!” JJ laughed and shook her head again. “About what you should pack. She would know.”

“Paula and I aren’t on the best terms.” Tony reminded her, surprised that JJ had forgotten. “She’s not exactly my biggest fan.”

JJ frowned. “What? Trust me, Tony, if Paula had a problem with you she wouldn’t have set us up. I’m her baby cousin.”
Which was a good point, but still… “Last time Paula and I worked together she ended up being kidnapped and beaten up.”

“She doesn’t blame you for that.” JJ argued. “That’s just what happens sometimes. How about I ask her for you? I’d offer to ask Todd, but…”

“No,” Tony interrupted quickly. “Not Todd.” Working on the same ship as JJ’s brother was going to be bad enough, without her having asked him for fashion advice for Tony.

“So I can ask Paula then?”

Tony sighed. “Sure, I guess. I can’t imagine it’s all that different for men and women.”

“Aside from the bras and tampons you mean?” JJ asked, with a teasing smirk.

“Those two words should never be used in the same sentence.” Tony protested, with a mock shudder. “I don’t know whether to be turned on by the thought of bras or disgusted at the tampons.”

JJ rolled her eyes. “You’re ridiculous. So, tell me about how you managed to get kicked out of six different boarding schools.”

12-12-12

“So, when are we meeting him?” Morgan’s voice sounded suddenly in JJ’s ear.

JJ started in fright, only barely managing to keep hold of the papers she was carrying. Spinning around so that she was facing her smirking teammate, JJ glared at him. “Don’t do that!”

“Do what?” Morgan asked, not even attempting to make his tone portray innocence. “I was just asking a question.”

JJ narrowed her eyes at him. “Well, don’t!”
“Do you hear that, Reid?” Morgan shook his head. “We’re not even allowed to ask questions anymore.”

JJ turned her glare on Reid who was sitting at his desk. “Spencer, don’t say anything.”

Despite being several feet away from her, Reid leaned away from her with wide eyes. JJ couldn’t help but soften her glare. Reid’s wide eyed looks always made her feel guilty. Besides, it wasn’t as though Reid had done anything. Except not warn her when Morgan was creeping up behind her. Which reminded her...

“You can’t keep sneaking up on me!” JJ turned her glare back on Morgan. “One day, I’m going to get such a fright I’ll throw all these papers in the air and then you’ll have to help me figure out which information goes in which file.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad actually.” Morgan was still smirking. “Sort of like Pick Up 52, except with unsubs.”

“Here then.” JJ shoved the pile of files into his hands, enjoying the way that he had to scramble to grab them all. “Clearly you’re bored. So here are some more cases for you to consult on.”

Now it was Morgan who was giving her a wide eyed look, though his didn’t make JJ feel guilty at all. In fact, it actually made her feel good. As though she’d won that round.

“But, JJ,” Morgan protested, glancing down at the files in his hands. “I’ve already got a stack of files at my desk.”

JJ crossed her arms. “Then why weren’t you doing them instead of sneaking up on me?”

“I was having a coffee break.”

JJ glanced pointedly at Morgan’s hands that were conspicuously free of coffee cups. “Really?”
“The coffee pot was empty.” Morgan explained quickly. “I was just waiting for the coffee to finish percolating.”

“I expect a hot coffee shaped apology in my office.” JJ demanded, even as she held out her arms to take back the files that she’d foisted on Morgan.

“Done.” Morgan agreed, quickly dropping the files back into her arms.

JJ tried to swallow down her victorious smirk, though she could feel it spreading over her face. “Thank you.”

“You didn’t answer the question.” Reid put in, from where he was still sitting at his desk.

“What question?” JJ asked, before remembering. “Oh, that question.”

“So?” Morgan prompted. “When are we meeting the famous Tony Dinozzo? You promised you’d introduce Tony to us before the end of the month and, given that he’s shipping out in three days, the clock is ticking.”

JJ narrowed her eyes. “How did you know that Tony’s leaving? Did Penelope tell you?”

“The question is not how I found out,” Morgan reminded her. “The question is when we get to meet him.”

JJ was willing to bet good money on Penelope having been the one to gossip with Morgan. “I’m going to arrange for us to go out for drinks sometime in the next few days. Unless our team or his team gets a case.” She was really hoping for a case.

Morgan looked suspicious. “You’re one of the people who choose when we take cases.”

“Good point.” JJ told him with mock sincerity. “That’s definitely a point in my favour, isn’t it?”

“How about tonight?” Morgan asked, glancing down at his watch. “It’s almost three and we still
haven’t got a case. Why push our luck and leave it till tomorrow? I’m free, and I know Penelope’s free. Reid, have you got plans tonight?”

“Uh, no.” Reid answered quickly.

“Fine.” JJ agreed eventually. “I’ll ring Tony and see if he’s free tonight.”

Now Morgan was the one smirking victoriously. JJ really hoped that Tony’s team were busy on a case.

“Don’t forget my coffee.” She reminded Morgan, just to get the last word in, before making a brisk retreat to her office.

Placing the files on one of the few clear areas of her desk, JJ sank into her chair and groaned. “Damn it.”

It wasn’t that she didn’t want the team to meet Tony, it just seemed like really bad timing. She and Tony hadn’t even been dating for three weeks. It far too soon to start introducing him to the other areas of her life, even if she was half convinced that she’d agree to marry him if he asked her to. Which he wouldn’t, because they hadn’t even been dating for three weeks!

Not to mention that he was about to go away for more than three times as many days as they’d been dating. (And, boy, did she wish that she hadn’t done the maths on that. It made her feel desperate and clingy.) What if he met someone else while he was away? What if their ‘spark’ died during the time apart? What was the point in introducing her team to a man that she might never see again?

12-12-12

Tony glanced towards his watch. He was pleased to note that it was almost five. Which, if it wasn’t for them having an open case, would have meant that he only had two days and fifteen minutes left working with Gibbs. Unfortunately the case was sure to mean late nights until they’d managed to arrest whoever had murdered Jamie Carr. So really, he had two days and an unknown number of overtime hours left working with Gibbs. At least the open case meant that the time wouldn’t crawl by. Though it was sure to be unpleasant, if only because Gibbs was still being a bastard.

Which was hardly surprising, given Gibbs’ temperament and history, but it certainly wasn’t giving
Tony any cause to regret his decision. Which was sad, really. He’d worked with Gibbs for four years, almost two years longer than he’d worked with anyone else. Leaving ought to feel like the end of an era, but it mostly just felt like a lucky escape.

Tony’s cell phone rang but, before answering it, he quickly glanced around the bullpen to make sure Gibbs wasn’t around to see him answer it. When he saw that the coast was clear, Tony flipped open his phone and brought it up to his ear.

“Special Agent Dinozzo.”

“Hey, Tony, it’s JJ.”

Tony couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face. “Hey.” He could see McGee and Ziva both watching him curiously, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care. “How are you?”

“I’m good.” JJ answered. “You’re still sounding tired.”

Tony sighed, and let his head fall back. “Yeah, things are a bit tense around here. We’ve got a new case.”

“Oh,” JJ sounded strangely pleased by that. “Okay, I was just ringing to see if you wanted to do the meet and greet with my team tonight, but we should postpone it until your case free.”

Tony didn’t know whether he was disappointed that he wouldn’t be seeing JJ, or relieved to have gotten out of meeting her team. “Yeah, we’ll be working late tonight.”

“I’ll tell them that you don’t have time to meet them before you leave.”

“We might have the case closed by Friday.” Tony offered, before he’d really thought it through. “We could maybe do something that night.”

“Isn’t that the night before you leave?”
“Yes,” Tony wondered if it was too early in their relationship to admit that he wanted to spend his last day on U.S. soil with her. Yeah, it probably was. “But I’m pretty much packed already, so we might as well arrange it for then.”
Chapter 13

It was almost nine o’clock on Friday evening when Tony finally completed the paperwork on the case that his team had been working on. They’d arrested Jamie Carr (who it turned out had not only faked her own death, but had also murdered two people) more than two hours earlier, but since it was Tony’s last day with the team he really needed to dot his i’s and cross his t’s before he shipped off. Which, given that JJ and her team mates were waiting to meet him for drinks, was more than a little frustrating.

Tony had rung JJ earlier, suggesting that they cancel the meet and greet, but apparently JJ’s team had been willing to wait. Tony didn’t mind all that much. He was just glad for the excuse to see JJ before he left.

Once his paperwork was printed, signed, copied, and delivered to the appropriate offices, Tony set about emptying his desk into the extra bag he’d brought.

“You’re really leaving then?”

Tony rolled his eyes, as he swept all his personal items off his desk and into the bag. “Yes, McGee, I’m really leaving.”

“But Gibbs…” McGee trailed off.

Tony looked up quickly, to ensure that Gibbs hadn’t suddenly crept up on them, before returning his attention to the task in front of him. He knew what McGee was trying to say. Unless Director Shepard did something, Gibbs was going to eat McGee alive. Still, Tony couldn’t find it in himself to feel all that sympathetic towards the probie who was part of the reason he’d starting hating his job.

“No one’s forcing you to stay, McGee. You could leave too.”

McGee stiffened. “I’m not scared, Tony! Gibbs is the best agent NCIS has. I’m not going to leave until I’ve learnt everything I can.”

Tony wondered what McGee would say if Tony told him that the higher ups didn’t consider Gibbs to be ‘the best’. Knowing McGee, he’d probably refuse to listen.
“Yes, Tony,” Ziva put in, from where she was sitting behind her desk. “Just because you’re poultry, doesn’t mean Tim is.”


“Is chicken not a variant of poultry?” Ziva questioned.

McGee sighed. “Yes, but the saying is ‘chicken’, not ‘poultry’.”

“I’m not running away.” Tony defended, despite knowing the pointlessness of it. “I’m being promoted.”

“You’re going from the best MCRT to the second best one.” McGee said disparagingly.

“It makes sense,” Ziva put in. “After all, Tony, no one would claim that you were the best.”

Tony frowned incredulously. “We’re not the best MCRT. We’re the first MCRT. There’s a difference.”


Tony slammed the last drawer shut, before taking a deep breath. There was point in getting worked up over Ziva and McGee’s idiocy. He picked up his backpack and slung it over his shoulder, before picking up his second bag.

“I’ll see you in January.” He told them blandly, before making his way towards the elevator.

“That’s it?” McGee questioned. “That’s all you’re going to say? Tony, we’ve worked together for more than a year.”
Tony turned back. “Goodbye, McGee.”

It was after nine when JJ finally got a text from Tony saying that he was on his way, and she couldn’t help the smile that spread across her face. She was looking forward to seeing him. Not only had she not seen him since their dinner date nearly a week ago but, after tonight, she wouldn’t see him for at least a month and a half. She loved the fact that he’d agreed to spend his last night in Washington with her. Well, her and Penelope, Morgan and Reid.

“Should I take that beaming smile of yours to mean that the elusive Tony is finally on his way?” Penelope asked, raising her voice to be heard over the music.

“Yeah, he should be here in a few minutes.”

Penelope sipped from her straw, her expression almost predatory. “Finally! I’ve been waiting to meet him for weeks.”

JJ let out a surprised laugh. “Penelope, I only met him three weeks ago.”

“And you were practically ready to marry the guy after your first date!” Penelope reminded her passionately. “JJ, you’re pretty much head over heels in love.”

JJ could feel her cheeks heating. Penelope was right. She’d fallen for Tony stupidly fast. She could only hope that it didn’t blow up in her face.

“We should get a new round of drinks.” Penelope decided. “What does Tony drink?”

“Really expensive Italian wine.” JJ answered quickly.

Penelope raised her eyebrows. “Really?”

“Hmmm,” JJ hummed happily. “I have never drunken anything as delicious as the Italian wines he
orders for me.”

“Somehow I doubt Italian wine is on the menu, let alone expensive wine.” Penelope pointed out. “Anything else?”

“Uh,” JJ frowned in thought. “Orange juice and tea.”

“Maybe we should wait until he arrives,” Penelope decided. “I was hoping you’d say something simple like beer, or scotch. Should we get Derek?”

JJ looked over to where Morgan was practically gyrating on the dance floor surrounded by women. The man was ridiculously attractive. “He’ll come over when he’s ready. Where’s Reid?”

“Bathroom, I think.” Penelope answered absently, her gaze fixed on where Morgan was dancing.

JJ shook her head fondly at the thought of Reid hiding in the bathroom. She wouldn’t blame him if he was. This really wasn’t his kind of scene and normally he left them to it after an hour or so. Well, if he hadn’t come out by the time Tony arrived, they’d just have to send Morgan in after him.

Speaking of Tony, JJ glanced towards the door to see if Tony was arriving yet. The door was shut but, as she watched, it was pushed open and Tony appeared in the doorway. She swallowed heavily. He looked really good.

Standing up, JJ started moving to meet Tony. She could hear Penelope questioning her as she left, but didn’t stop to reply. Her friend would have her questions answered soon enough.

“Tony, hey.” She greeted, as she met Tony a few feet from the dance floor.

Tony kissed her tenderly. “Sorry I’m so late.”

JJ placed a hand on his chest and leaned in for another kiss. “No problem. We all understand the demands of work.”
“Yeah, I’m sure you do.” Tony smiled down at her. It was a breathtaking sight. Or at least, it would have been if he didn’t look so pale and exhausted.

JJ couldn’t help but feel guilty. Of course Tony was exhausted. He’d been exhausted last week, and another week of working with his horrible boss would have only made things worse. She should have put her foot down and sent Penelope, Morgan, and Reid home when Tony had told her he would be working late. Or at least left them at the bar and gone somewhere quieter to meet Tony.

“JJ,” Tony’s voice pulled JJ out of her guilt ridden thoughts. “Are you alright?”

JJ forced a smile, as she tried to refocus on the now. Tony was here. It was too late to worry about what she ought to have done. “Yeah, I’m fine. What do you want to do first? Order a drink or meet my team?”

Tony’s gaze flicked around the bar, before returning to her. “Well, a beer sounds pretty good right now.”

JJ filed that information away for the next time she had the opportunity to order Tony a drink. “So you do drink beer. Penelope suggested that we order for you, but all I could remember was that you drank expensive Italian wine, orange juice and tea.”

Tony’s hand brushed against JJ’s, before slipping his fingers between hers so that they were intertwined. “I drink most things.”

“Anything I should stay away from.” JJ asked, squeezing his hand. It was hard to imagine that she had ever avoided holding a boyfriend’s hand. Holding hands with Tony had become one of her favourite things to do.

“Anything with an umbrella or curly straw.” Tony answered, as they made their way toward the bar.

JJ grinned up at him. “Too much of a threat to your masculinity?”

“No man with any self respect ever orders a drink with an umbrella.”
“So, if I ordered you a Pina Colada without the umbrella you’d drink it?”

“I’d try it.” Tony answered, sounding unconvinced. “So, who from your team is here?”

“Penelope, Morgan, Reid,” JJ answered. “I didn’t invite Hotch or Gideon for tonight. They’re not so much our friends as, well, our bosses. It always gets a bit awkward when they’re around.”

Tony’s expression fell for a moment, before he was suddenly smiling again. If JJ hadn’t already known how good Tony was at hiding his emotions she would have presumed that she’d imagined it. She wished she knew Tony well enough to know why he had reacted like that. Or at least, that they were somewhere else so that she could ask him about it.

“Yeah, inviting Gibbs out for drinks has never been my idea of a good time.” Tony agreed, as though nothing had happened. “But then, I haven’t gone out for drinks with my teammates since I was a detective in Baltimore.”

“I guess I’m lucky to have teammates that I get along with.” JJ realised. “Though I’m not looking forward to Agent Greenaway arriving next week. The agent in her position always throws our team dynamics out.”

“You have a new agent arriving next week?” Tony questioned, as the crowd of people gathered around the bar finally thinned enough to let them close enough to order. Now they just had to wait for a bartender to take their order.

“Yeah, Agent Elle Greenaway.” JJ sighed, feeling like a petulant teenager complaining about the new girl at school. “She’s transferring in from our Seattle office.”

“Our lab tech got a new assistant this week.” Tony leant against the counter. “I don’t think she’s ever had one before so she’s pretty unhappy about it.”

“She’s unhappy about having extra help?” JJ asked in surprise, before wincing when she realised that it wasn’t all that different from her being unhappy that their team would finally have the normal number of agents in it again.

Tony shrugged. “I wouldn’t be all that happy if I had to work alone in a room with him all day every day either. He’s a bit creepy.”
JJ grimaced. “I guess I should be glad that Agent Greenaway is unlikely to be creepy.”

“What can I get you?” A bartender asked, suddenly appearing in front of them.

“A glass of whatever you have on tap.” Tony answered, before looking towards JJ.

“Make that two,” JJ added, thinking of Morgan. “As well as two Pina Colada without umbrellas, a cosmo, and a root beer.”

13-13-13

Tony was more than a little nervous as he followed JJ through the bar towards where her friends were waiting to meet him. Since they’d ordered six drinks, a dangerous number for any two people to attempt to carry without a tray, JJ had taken the two glasses of beer to the table before coming back to help him carry the rest. Tony wasn’t proud of it, but he’d seriously considered sneaking out of the bar while she was gone. He was too tired to want to spend what was left of the evening awkwardly sitting around with FBI agents. Let alone FBI profilers.

Since JJ was walking several feet in front of him when she stopped at a table, Tony had time to briefly study the people sitting around it. There were three of them, two men and women, and it was easy to tell which one was which. JJ had described them well.

Tony set the two Pina Coladas he was carrying down on the table while he waited for JJ to start the introductions. Thankfully, he didn’t have to wait long.

“Tony, this is Penelope, Morgan and Reid.” JJ said simply. “Guys, this is Tony.”

Tony had to resist the urge to squirm under JJ’s friends assessing stares. He didn’t want to know what profile Morgan and Reid were coming up for him. Penelope’s stare wasn’t any better. She might not have been a profiler, but her expression was almost predatory.

“Good to meet you.” Tony offered a smile, offering his hand to Reid who was closest to him.
Reid just stared for a few seconds until Morgan jostled his arm. “Uh, yes, I’m Doctor Spencer Reid.” He introduced, ignoring Tony’s hand.

Tony tried not to wince at the inauspicious start. He hadn’t really expected the awkwardness so start so early in the evening. He started to lower his hand, but Morgan quickly reached out and grasped it in Dr. Reid’s place.

“Derek Morgan,” He introduced, his handshake unyielding and confident. “Sorry about Reid. He doesn’t like shaking hands.”

“Tony Dinozzo,” Tony released Morgan’s hand, before turning back to Reid. “Sorry if I made you uncomfortable, Dr. Reid.”

Reid gave an awkward shrug. “It’s alright.”

Tony smiled, more out of a desire to help Reid relax than anything, and turned to the last of JJ’s friends. “And you must be Penelope Garcia, Technical Analyst extraordinaire.”

Penelope’s smile was beaming. “I sure am, and can I just say how wonderful it is to finally meet you!”

“Finally?” Tony asked lightly, sliding onto the seat beside him.

JJ’s sigh sounded as though it was probably accompanied by rolled eyes. “We’ve only known each other for three weeks, Penelope. It’s not as though I’ve been hiding him from you for months.”

“As if you would have dared.” Penelope returned. “Besides, if you’d waited much longer I’d have just visited NCIS one day and met him without you.”

“He’s not going to be at NCIS again until January.” JJ sounded as though she wanted to laugh.

“So, Tony,” Morgan started, drawing Tony’s attention. “JJ told us you’ve just received a promotion to Unit Chief. Congratulations, man.”
Tony decided not to quibble over the differences between NCIS and FBI terminology. “Thanks. It’s all happened very quickly. I wasn’t even considering a change of position until two weeks ago.”

“Will you be working with the same team?” Morgan asked.

Tony was sure the question came more from a desire to make conversation than any real interest, but he appreciated the other man’s willingness to help make the evening go smoothly.

“No,” Tony almost shivered at the thought of having to lead a team with McGee and Ziva in it. “I’ll be moving to the secondary Major Crimes Response Team. Their current Agent in Charge will be retiring next month.”

“How many teams does NCIS have?” Morgan asked, sounding surprised. “I wouldn’t have thought that many major crimes fell under your jurisdiction.”

“NCIS defines a major crime as being any crime classified as a felony.” Reid spoke, before Tony could.

“Not to mention that there are around fifteen hundred thousand Americans who fall under NCIS jurisdiction,” JJ added, her hand slipping into Tony’s. “Only a fifth of which are stationed overseas.”

Tony blinked at her in surprise, before remembering that he’d been the one to tell her that on their first date. It was a good feeling to know that she’d been listening. Even if the conversation had been something as boring at the number of navy personnel.

JJ’s friends were looking surprised too.

“That’s not…” Reid broke off when Morgan elbowed him again.

“Those are some impressive stats, JJ.”

JJ shrugged, looking amused. “Well, they would be if Spencer wasn’t over there ready to tell me
Reid looked a bit sheepish. “It doesn’t matter.”

Tony eyed him speculatively. He’d presumed Reid was a lot like McGee - used to being the smartest guy in the room - but McGee would never have given up the chance to prove how knowledgeable he was. Clearly there was more to Reid than he’d originally thought.

“Here,” JJ nudged Tony on the arm, even as she pushed on the Pina Coladas closer to him. “You’ll want to try this while it’s still cold.”

“Not to mention before my beer gets warm so I can wash the taste away.” Tony replied, eyeing the cocktail with trepidation.

“It’s not that bad.” JJ rolled her eyes. “You promised you’d try it.”

“You’re making him try a cocktail?” Morgan sounded sympathetic.

“Without the umbrella.” JJ emphasised, as though it made a difference. Which it did, since Tony had been the one to specify the condition.

Not wanting to make too much of a fuss out of it, Tony picked up the glass and brought the straw to his mouth. He tried a mouthful and couldn’t help but be surprised at how enjoyable it was. It was like a fresh, creamy dessert in drink form.

“Well?” JJ asked expectantly.

“It’s not bad.” Tony admitted, watching Morgan’s reaction out of the corner of his eye. If anyone at the table was going to think less of him because he’d enjoyed a girly drink it would be Morgan, but he didn’t seem all that bothered.

“I think you mispronounced mouth-wateringly delicious!” Penelope corrected, pulling her own drink towards her. “You should order a cosmo next. They’re delicious too.”
Tony eyed Penelope’s drink skeptically. It might not have had an umbrella, but the curly piece of orange skin on the side was just as bad.

“So are you looking forward to the next couple of months?” Morgan asked, once the silence had grown slightly uncomfortable.

Tony swallowed down a wince. Normally he was the one filling awkward silences, but he was just too tired to think of anything to say. “Not really. I’ll be the only form of law enforcement on a ship with over five thousand personnel. From what I’ve heard, my job will mostly consist of trying to break up friendly poker games.”

“Last I looked playing poker wasn’t a felony.” Penelope pointed out. “Didn’t Reid say that you only investigate felonies?”

“The Major Crimes Response Teams only investigate felonies.” Tony corrected. “As Agent Afloat I’ll be responsible for investigating any and all violations of navy regulations.”

“No wonder they don’t like you guys.” JJ commented. “It’d be like having your mom living with you.”

“No wonder you’re not looking forward to it.” Morgan countered. “It’d be like being the mom of more than five thousand kids.”

“Yeah, I’m just glad I’ll only be there for a month and a half.” Tony answered. “Normally an Agent Afloat appointment lasts for an entire year.”

“So why are they bothering if you’re only going to be there for a month and a bit?” Morgan asked curiously.

Tony shrugged. “Our Assistant Director said something about dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s. It’s sort of a rite of passage in NCIS.”

“So they’re fast tracking you?”
Tony blinked, he hadn’t considered it like that. “I guess.”

The conversation flowed smoothly from there, mostly due to Morgan and Penelope’s influence, though by the time Tony had finished his beer he was starting to look for an excuse to leave. It was past ten, which wouldn’t normally be a problem, but given the week he’d had (and the fact he was due to report to duty at six hundred hours the next morning) he was more than ready for bed. Thankfully JJ seemed to notice that he was flagging and so gave their excuses about ten minutes later.

After having said his farewells to JJ’s friends, who he’d liked far more than he’d expected to, Tony slipped his hand into JJ’s as they left together. He wasn’t sure what JJ was planning. Did she want to come home with him?

“I’m going to miss you.” JJ commented, as they exchanged the noisy bar for the relative silence of a Washington street.

Tony looked down at her. That meant she wasn’t wanting to come home with him, right? He could hardly believe that he was actually feeling relieved (especially since he knew his relief had nothing to do with his rule about not inviting women into his apartment). How could he be too tired to want to spend a night with JJ?

“Me too.” He admitted, squeezing her hand. “I’ll send you a postcard if I can.”

JJ stopped and turned to look up at him. “I, uh, I’ll be waiting when you get back.”

Tony stared at her, noting her blushing cheeks made visible by the nearby streetlight. “Really?”

“I know it’s too soon to be making any commitments,” JJ said hurriedly. “And I’m not saying I expect you to wait for me, or anything. But I, uh, really like you, and I’m willing to wait a month and a half if you are.”

“I am.” Tony agreed, before his brain could catch up. Not that he regretted it. “I really like you too.”
Chapter 14

Tony had only been on the USS Reagan for a few days when he decided that he’d been too hasty in predicting that his time as agent afloat would be unpleasant. Admittedly it was frustrating to be living in a metal maze, and the complete lack of access to any kind of movie was a cruel form of torture, but aside from that it wasn’t too bad.

It was a little like a working holiday. Though without the actual working part, since there was pretty much nothing to do. Either the ship had been staffed with over five thousand navy personnel who actually believed in following the law, or the criminals on board were just very sneaky. Personally, Tony thought the second option was much more likely.

But since no obvious crime had been committed, and Tony didn’t really want to start spying on personal conversations to try and find a less obvious crime, Tony hadn’t had to do anything since he’d arrived. Which made him more than a little glad that he wasn’t going to be stuck as agent afloat for a whole year. A month and a half of holiday was one thing, but a year of boredom would drive him mad.

So, with nothing to do, Tony had spent most of his time lying in his bunk and reading the few books he’d managed to fit into his bag - a near perfect way to destress from his nightmarish last weeks with Gibbs. Except after a week of reading, Tony’s books were finished and he was starting to get restless. He wanted to do something, talk to someone. Anything except sit by himself in his bunk.

There weren’t really many options.

He could wander through the maze of the ship and try and see if they had some kind of gym or, better yet, a basketball court.

He could start snooping around to see if he could find himself some kind of crime or regulation violation that he could investigate.

Or he could go and introduce himself to JJ’s brother and give him the care package like he’d promised JJ he would.

Tony really didn’t want to do the third option. There was just so many ways that it could go wrong. Ignoring the fact that brothers didn’t tend to approve of their sisters’ boyfriends, Tony wasn’t even sure that Petty Officer Todd Jareau had received JJ’s letter explaining that she was seeing someone yet. It would be bad enough to introduce himself as JJ’s much older boyfriend when Todd knew she was dating someone, but it would be so much worse to introduce himself only to find out that Todd had no idea what he was talking about. Talk about awkward.

He’d just have to give in another week or two. Long enough to give Todd a chance to receive JJ’s letter, but not so long that it would be obvious to JJ that he’d waited. Presuming of course that JJ had been serious about waiting for him, and still felt that way when he got back.

Unfortunately that just left two options and Tony didn’t feel all that enthused about either of them. Did he want to be the suck-up-agent-afloat who tried to work out alongside the navy personnel or the busybody-agent-afloat who was poking his nose into everyone’s business?

Maybe he’d just read through his books again.

14-14-14
JJ’s first meeting with Agent Elle Greenaway did not go well.

Admittedly part of the blame of that was on her. JJ hadn’t exactly been her normal friendly self when she’d introduced herself to the new agent on the team.

The reason for which she was pretty sure could be traced back to the fact that Tony had boarded a ship and left forty eight hours earlier. Which was ridiculous. Tony was only going to be gone for a month and a half, and it wasn’t as though she’d known him long enough to have formed any kind of proper emotional connection to him.

Except that she had.

And when she had woken up on Saturday morning and remembered that Tony was gone, she’d barely managed to swallow back the tears that wanted to fall. She missed him. Which was stupid. She knew it was stupid. It wasn’t as though she would have spent the day with Tony anyway, but the knowledge that she wasn’t going to see him for more than a month made her heart ache.

It was still aching when she woke up on Monday morning - tired from an emotional weekend - and the knowledge that Elle would be joining the team that morning didn’t make her feel any better. She was so sick of the agents in Elle’s position looking down on her and targeting her as the ‘weakest link’ to exploit when they were trying to find a way to fit into the team.

She knew they probably weren’t doing it on purpose, at least she hoped they weren’t - that would be unsettlingly manipulative - but that didn’t stop it from getting annoying. She didn’t want to have to put up with it again.

So she’d driven to work feeling more than a little defensive and reminding herself that she was strong, powerful woman who, despite not being a profiler, was very good at her job. It had helped a little, but then she’d walked into the bullpen and seen Elle talking with Morgan and Reid and her defensiveness had surged back into life.

“All right. I’m up for a challenge.” Elle had told Morgan and Reid, with the same mixture of arrogance and a need to prove herself that all her predecessors had shared.

So JJ had swept in, feeling a desperate need to prove that she wasn’t a weak link to be exploited. She’d give Elle casefiles to look through, introduced herself, and then ran off a brief version of Elle’s history to try and gain the upper hand.

All for Elle to simply say, “Not bad.” As though she could do so much better (which, as a profiler, she probably could). It wasn’t just the words though. It was the arrogance with which Elle had spoken them. The way she hadn’t even tried to hide her feelings of superiority.

It just made JJ mad!

But she was even madder that she’d allowed her insecurity to affect her actions. Who knew how it would have gone if JJ had just introduced herself like she normally did. If she’d smiled genuinely, and invited her out for drinks after work.

Probably nothing different, but at least then JJ wouldn’t feel as though she was a mean girl in high school trying to prove her superiority to the new girl. What was she, sixteen?

The biggest problem was that it just made her miss Tony more. She was sure that, if Tony had been in town and she’d been able to tell him the story, he would have made her feel better.

Which, once again, begged the question of how had she gotten so attached to the guy in such a short
time? It really was ridiculous.

Tony was less than impressed when the first crime that was reported to him was a case of petty theft. They were on a multi-billion dollar Aircraft Carrier, filled with deployed military personnel, and someone had apparently stolen Seaman Thomas’ comic books.

How was this his job?

But it was, and a crime was a crime, so Tony questioned the sailors that Seaman Thomas bunked with, before dusting down the Seaman’s locker for prints and sending them to Abby so that she could put them through the Navy’s database.

That should have been just about the end of it. After all, unless the culprit had worn gloves, Abby was guaranteed to ID the owners’ of the various prints on the locker. As soon as she got back to him he’d be able to confront them, retrieve the comic books, and write the culprit up. Case solved.

Except the next day, Tony still hadn’t heard back from Abby and five more Seamen came forward to report missing comic books that had disappeared since the ship had last been docked. Apparently most of them had presumed that the comic books were just missing, until scuttlebutt had reported that someone was stealing comic books.

Tony wasn’t sure what was hardest to believe: that there were so many geeky navy personnel, or that someone was actually going on a comic book theft spree. What middle school graduate still stole comic books?

Unfortunately, too much time had passed since the comics had been stolen for Tony to dust for prints, but he made sure to question all the victims’ roommates and tried to ignore how much he felt like Nancy Drew. (The barely veiled amusement from the more ‘jock-like’ interviewees really didn’t help.)

When Abby still hadn’t gotten back to him on the third day, Tony arranged to make a call to the NCIS Forensic Lab so he could ask her what the hold up was. The call didn’t go well.

“This is Abby!” She answered chirpily.

“Hey, Abs,” Tony greeted warmly. “It’s Tony.”

“Oh,” Abby started, the coolness of her tone a stark contrast to her chirpy greeting. “What do you want?”

Tony’s stomach twisted unhappily. She wasn’t still holding a grudge about him leaving, was she? It had been almost three weeks since he’d left, and just over a month since she’d found out that it was going to happen. She had to forgive him at some point, right?
“Come on, Abs,” He said coaxingly. “Don’t be like that.”

“Like what? Angry that you abandoned us? That you abandoned Gibbs after everything he’s done for you? We were a family, Tony! And you’ve thrown it all away for a cushy promotion.”

Tony didn’t even know where to start. “A cushy promotion? I’ll be doing what Gibbs does, just with a different team. You wouldn’t call Gibbs’ job cushy, would you?”

Abby scoffed. “Like you could even do Gibbs’ job!”

“I didn’t call you to argue.” Tony sighed. “I need to know how the fingerprint search is coming.”

“Oh, you mean that email you sent me a few days ago?” Abby asked. “I’m sorry, I don’t read emails from traitors.”

It was all Tony could do not to growl at her. “You can’t just ignore my emails because you’re mad at me, Abby. We both still work at NCIS. It’s your job to process evidence.”

“Don’t you dare try and tell me what my job is!” Abby snapped. “You think you’re so important, just because you got some stupid promotion? Well, let me tell you something, Tony Dinozzo, you’re nothing without Gibbs! And I look forward to watching you fail!”

Tony opened his mouth to protest, or defend himself, or something, but before he could figure out what to say the phone line went dead. He had never been so glad to be on a private phone call. If the navy personnel in the room had heard Abby’s rant it would have probably been across the whole ship within hours. Not to mention that it would have all but torpedoed any chance of having a successful time as Agent Afloat. Who would trust an NCIS agent whose friends thought he was a failure?

14-14-14

Tim McGee hadn’t actually admitted it out loud to anyone, but he’d sort of expected to get the SFA position when Tony had left. After all, he knew that Tony had become Gibbs’ SFA a year and a half after joining the team, and Tim had been working for Gibbs for more than year. Which, when you considered how much more qualified Tim was, meant he was overdue for a promotion. Sure he knew that an agent was supposed to spend two years as a probationary agent before being eligible
for promotion, but if they’d made an exception for Tony it made sense that they’d make one for Tim too.

So it had had been an unpleasant surprise to arrive at work the Monday after Tony had left to find
that Director Shepard had appointed their team a Temporary Senior Field Agent until a more long
term candidate could be found.

And if that wasn’t bad enough, the director had picked an old guy who had apparently served as a
Marine Sergeant Major before receiving a Purple Heart and being Honourably Discharged. Tim
couldn’t figure out what the director had been thinking! Why would anyone appoint two old
dinosaurs to be the ranking members of NCIS’ best Major Crimes Response Team? (Though
admittedly, Agent Andrew Marshall wasn’t that old. He was probably only a few years older than
Tony, and definitely younger than Gibbs.)

Not to mention that, even after working with Marshall for four weeks, Tim couldn’t figure out what
skills the older man was supposed to bring to the team. Sure he knew the military, but then so did
Gibbs. And, admittedly, he had six years of investigative experience with NCIS, but it wasn’t as
though investigating was even that hard.

In fact, the only thing that Marshall seemed to be really good at was annoying Gibbs.

Tim wasn’t sure what annoyed Gibbs the most: that Marshall was completely unflinching in face of
Gibbs’ fury or that Marshall’s marine rank was higher than Gibbs’ had been. Of course the fact that
Marshall had replaced Tony, had been forced onto the team, and insisted that Tim and Ziva respect
the position of SFA didn’t help either.

All in all, Marshall’s stubbornness, perpetual nonchalance, and always present formality was really
putting a damper on the team dynamics. Gibbs was constantly angry and, since Marshall was
completely unaffected by hurricane Gibbs, he was taking it out on Tim and Ziva. Admittedly,
Marshall had actually stepped in to defend them more than once, but that just made Gibbs’ fury
grow.

On top of that, Ziva wasn’t nearly as much fun to work with as Tim had thought she would be. He’d
really enjoyed their first few weeks working together, when she’d appreciated his help in learning the
ropes and they’d been able to team up against Tony. With Tony gone though, she’d made Tim the
recipient of all her mocking and she’d made it more than obvious that she didn’t think that there was
anything he could teach her.

It made Tim miss the days when the team had been made up of Tim, Gibbs, Kate, and Tony. Back
when there had been a lighthearted feel to things. They’d joked around and teased each other while working cases. They’d been almost, if not quite, friends, and he’d actually enjoyed his job. (Even if Tony had been an annoying idiot who was a pain in the ass to work with.)

But now that Kate was dead, and Tony had deserted them, everything was different. Everything was so formal and tense all the time. There was no joking or teasing. No casual conversations. No almost friendships. And it was only made worse by the fact that they kept hitting dead ends in their cases. How was Tim supposed to prove himself as a superior agent and, one year soon, the obvious candidate for Director of the NCIS if their team’s solve rate wasn’t excellent?

Tim hoped that the director noticed what was going on soon and took Marshall off the team. They’d had a good thing going, and it should have been even better without Tony around to play at being an idiot. Director Shepard was sure to notice how detrimental Marshall was to their team soon, and when she did she’d make Tim the SFA and everything would be as it should be.

14-14-14

Tony sent Abby four emails (all of which she ignored), and rang her three times (all of which ended with her hanging up on him), before giving up and reporting her refusal to process his evidence to Assistant Director Stewart. He felt like a terrible nark, and knew that he was probably ruining any chance to get Abby to forgive him, but he had a crime that needed to be solved. Not to mention that letting Abby off the hook would set a precedent. It would be hard enough to be the Agent in Charge of the second MCRT without Abby refusing to process their evidence.

The case went smoothly from there. Abby sent Tony the fingerprint results, Tony searched the suspect’s locker, found the comic books, arrested the culprit (who had apparently just been a bored sailor trying to make his life more interesting), and returned the comic books to their rightful owners. Case closed.

It would have been a victory if the case hadn’t cost him one of his friends. Abby had been clear about that in the email that had contained the fingerprint results. The email had been angry and hate-filled, and Tony had known Abby long enough to know that she could keep a grudge for years. There was no coming back from this level of Abby-hatred.

And the worst part was that he couldn’t even deny that he’d deserved it. He’d narked on her to the Assistant Director over a few stolen comic books. What kind of friend did that? How had he gotten so wrapped up in the case that he’d been willing to throw a friendship away?

Though, on the other hand, he had a small voice in head reminding him that Abby hadn’t been a
great friend to him either. She hadn’t supported his promotion and, when he’d gone to for help with a
case, she’d left him out in the cold. Not to mention how cruel she’d been on the phone.

Did that mean he should be glad that their friendship was over? Or at least not feel guilty for having
made a justified complaint to Stewart? It was just all so confusing, and he had way too much time to
think about it and twist himself into knots.

14-14-14

Petty Officer First Class Todd Jareau always looked forward to his sister’s letters. JJ really knew
how to spin a story and she filled her letters with enough information to almost make Todd forget
that he only got to see her a few times a year. She told him about her work, her friends, about Mom
and Dad (though he had normally read that stuff in his Mom’s letters), and, very occasionally, about
a new guy she was dating.

It had been about six months since JJ had written to tell him that she had broken up with Justin
Monroe, and he hadn’t heard about any guy since, so he wasn’t surprised to read about a new guy in
her most recent letter. Apparently Paula had set her up with one of her exes (which, if anyone
wanted Todd’s opinion, was just weird) - a Tony Dinozzo.

JJ had included a few details: he was a NCIS agent, older than her (but she didn’t say by how much),
and apparently knowledgeable about good Italian wines. Todd didn’t really care - after all, chances
were this Tony wouldn’t be in JJ’s life long enough for him to actually meet Todd - and so turned his
attention to the more interesting parts of JJ’s letter and forgot all about JJ’s new guy.

At least he did until Petty Officer Sam ‘Scaly’ Peters, one of his bunkmates, started grumbling about
how an Agent Dinozzo had started a shipwide purge of alcoholic contraband.

“What?” Todd asked, glancing up from the shoes he’d been shining.

“Huh?” Scaly looked shocked, as though he hadn’t thought Todd was listening. Which to be fair,
Todd hadn’t been. Not really. Not until the name Dinozzo came up.

“Who’s Dinozzo?” Todd asked patiently.

Todd rolled his eyes. “Dude, why would I need to know who the Agent Afloat is?”

“You’re such an fricken goody-good.” Scaly groused. “I bet you don’t even have any booze squirreled away.”

Which was true, but Todd didn’t want to get off track. “So why is this ‘Agent Dinozzo’ so worked up about alcohol?”

Scaly shrugged. “I heard some stupid idiots ended up in the sickbay with alcohol poisoning. Rumour has it they bought spiked booze at our last port.”

“Are they going to be alright?” Todd asked in concern.

Scaly snorted. “Who fricken cares. They’re the reason this jackass is turning this ship into a fricken police state!”

“And you said his name is Tony Dinozzo?”

Scaly narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Why the hell are you so interested in this agent?”

“My sister just started dating an NCIS Agent named Tony Dinozzo.” Todd admitted. “I figure it’s gotta be the same guy, right? How many NCIS Agents named Tony Dinozzo can there be?”

“So you’ve got an in with this agent?” Scaly asked slowly. “You can hide my booze then. He won’t dare look through your stuff.”

“I’m not hiding your booze.” Todd denied firmly, more than a little tempted to report Scaly’s stash to this Agent Dinozzo. It would be an excuse to talk to him at least. Though, the more Todd thought about it, this agent couldn’t be JJ’s guy. She would have told him if her boyfriend was being assigned to the USS Reagan. Right?
Tony had been on the USS Reagan for six weeks before he finally worked up the courage to introduce himself to JJ’s younger brother. Well, he wasn’t sure it was courage so much as the knowledge that he was running out of time to give Todd the care package JJ had sent. Besides, Tony was due to ship back to DC in a week which meant that, if Todd reacted badly, Tony had an escape plan.

With that comforting thought, Tony had a message sent to Petty Officer Todd Jareau ordering him to report to the Agent Afloat’s office. At least this way, Tony wouldn’t have to introduce himself with an audience. Though, he couldn’t help but hope that JJ’s brother just wouldn’t show up (then he’d be able to tell JJ that he’d tried, without actually having to meet the guy).

It wasn’t to be though, and a knock sounded on the door at the exact time that Tony had ordered Petty Officer Jareau to show up. The kid’s promptness boded well for his career in the navy.

“Come in.”

Petty Officer Jareau looked nothing like JJ. To start with, his hair was brown. Not to mention that, where JJ was slender, her brother was built like a football player. It did not bode well for Tony’s continued wellbeing.

Jareau stood to attention in front of Tony’s desk. “Petty Officer Jareau reported as ordered, sir.”

“The formality is unnecessary, Petty Officer.” Tony told him. “I’m an NCIS agent, not a Naval Officer.”

“Yes, sir.” Jareau agreed formally, though he did shift into the parade rest position.

Tony really wasn’t sure where to start. “Your sister says hi.” He said awkwardly, before gesturing to the small box that was sitting to the side of his desk. “She asked me to give this to you.”

Jareau’s gaze shifted to the box and then back to Tony. “So you are the Agent Tony Dinozzo who’s dating Jenny?”
Tony’s mouth felt dry. “Yes. I take it you’ve gotten JJ’s letter?”

“A few weeks ago.” Jareau answered. “But Jenny didn’t say anything about you being assigned here, so I presumed you were just another agent with the same name.”

“NCIS is a small agency.” Tony told him. “I doubt we even have two John Smiths and, uh, my assignment here was pretty last minute.”

“You’ve been here for a few months now, though, right?” Jareau questioned.

“A month and a half.” Tony corrected. “I leave next week.”

Jareau’s mouth twitched. “Finished purging the ship of every drop of alcohol then?”

Tony sighed. He’d really made a name for himself on the Reagan, and it wasn’t a good one. Still, hopefully he’d managed to put the fear of regulations down on the sailors and there would be less eighteen year olds almost dying from alcohol poisoning.

“I have a new role starting in DC next month.” Tony explained, feeling more than a little awkward.

“So if I write a letter to Jenny you could give it to her?”

“Sure.” Tony agreed quickly. He just wanted the conversation to be over already.

“Thank you.” Jareau said, before they fell into an awkward silence.

Tony searched his mind desperately for something to say, but his mind was blank.

“Aren’t you a bit old for Jenny?” Jareau asked suddenly. “What are you, forty?”

Tony stiffened. “I’m ten years older than her.”
“Huh,” Jareau frowned, before shrugging. “Ah, well, Jenny’d have my ass if I tried to warn you off her or anything. Just be good to her, alright?”

“I will.” Tony promised, before gesturing towards the box. “Feel free to take that back to your bunk to open it. I hope nothing has spoiled in the time it’s taken me to give it to you.”

“You’ve had your hands full.” Jareau commented forgivingly, stepping closer to pick up the box. “Thanks for delivering it.”

“You’re welcome.” Tony watched hopefully as JJ’s brother turned towards the door. Was that it? Was the conversation over?

“I’ll have that letter to you in a few days.” Jareau commented, before giving Tony a casual salute. “See ya.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The first thing Tony did after returning to DC was have a long shower. The showers on the USS Reagan hadn’t been as bad as he had imagined they would be, but neither had they held a candle to his shower at home. Not only was the water pressure dismal, but there had been actual time limits on how long a person could spend in the shower. He hadn’t had a shower longer than five minutes for a month and a half! It was hard to feel completely clean when you hadn’t had the time to properly wash.

The second thing Tony did was stare at his phone and try to decide whether his first phone call should be to JJ or Asher. On the one hand JJ was sort of his girlfriend, except they’d never actually made that official - so JJ was just a woman he’d been a few dates with and had promised to wait for him. But a month and a half was a long time for a woman to wait for a man who wasn’t her boyfriend - maybe JJ had moved on.

On the other hand Asher was his best friend and Tony was pretty sure he’d be pleased to hear from him. Though that would probably all change once Tony started his new position. He could still remember JJ’s comments about liking her bosses, but not wanting to socialise with them since it took all the fun out of things. That would be him soon. Still, he wouldn't become Asher’s boss for another two weeks, so he figured he might as well make the most of the time he had left.

Which made the decision obvious, so the third thing Tony did was ring Asher.

“Special Agent Balboa speaking.”

Tony’s mouth felt dry, but he’d always been good at braving things out. “Hey, Asher,” He greeted brightly. “Guess who's back on dry land?”

“Tony!” Asher’s voice boomed through the phone. “Barb said you were due back today. She didn't know the specifics though, otherwise we would have met you at the airstrip. How are you, man?”

Asher’s enthusiasm was a balm to Tony’s insecurities. “I'm glad to be back on solid land. Where the showers are long enough to get you clean and televisions actually exist. How's Barb?”

“Ask her yourself at dinner tonight.” Asher ordered. “Unless you've got plans with that FBI lady of
“No plans.” Tony admitted, a broad smile spreading across his face. “What time should I come by?”

“Awesome!” Asher sounded pleased. “Barb’ll be thrilled. Come around whenever. My team was given an extra week of leave since we’re currently down a Agent in Charge, so I’m currently a man of leisure.”

Tony laughed. “Unlikely. Barb will have written a list of chores a foot long.”

“Careful, Tony,” Asher warned. “One of those chores is cooking dinner for tonight. Too many jokes and you might find yourself with a little laxative in your stew.”

“Sure, sure.” Tony rolled his eyes. “As though you would risk Barb’s fury by poisoning a guest. Now, what should I bring?”

“You know the drill. Just bring yourself. I’ll see you later this afternoon.”

With that phone call made, Tony was back to staring at his phone and trying to decide whether or not to ring JJ. He’d been looking forward to talking to her again for over a month, but in a way that just made thing worse. What if he was more interested in her than she was in him? What if she’d moved on? What if…

Tony groaned. His thoughts were going around circles. So what if JJ had moved on? Yes, it would be disappointing, but it wasn’t as though he’d never been dumped before. He just needed to ring her, pull off the band-aid. Then he’d know what she was thinking and he could stop stressing about it.

15-15-15

JJ hated organised crime cases. She hated the lack of evidence that they inevitably had, she hated knowing that most of the people involved had probably gotten away with a multitude of crimes already, and she hated the cold-heartedness of the mob culture.

Thankfully, the BAU didn’t get them very often. Partly due to the fact that the mafias and mobs
specialised in not leaving enough evidence for crimes to be connected and partly due to the FBI’s Organised Crime Unit not seeming to understand intra-agency co-operation. But when they did get an organised crime case it was a doozy, and this one was no different.

The blood stained crime scene had been bad enough, but now there was an undercover FBI agent missing and presumed tortured by the unsub. They were all trying not to presume that Jimmy Baker was dead, but it got harder each minute. One thing was for sure, if Jimmy Baker was alive, he was probably wishing he was dead.

JJ stared at her computer screen, wishing desperately for someone to run into her office bearing good news. She hated not being able to do anything to help, especially when she knew how frustrated her team was at their lack of leads. They had nothing except that their unsub was probably Michael Rosso’s hitman, but that wasn’t much help.

It was times like this that made JJ wish they had someone on the team who specialized in Organised Crime. Morgan did his best, but his specialty was obsessive behaviours and explosives. They needed someone like Tony who had done his post-graduate study on Organised Crime.

JJ’s phone vibrated on her desk, startling her out of her thoughts. Bringing the phone to her ear, JJ tried to pull her thoughts together. It was probably a member of the press wanting a quote for the article they were writing and, if she wasn’t properly focused, she’d probably do something like mention the case’s connection to the mob.

“Agent Jareau speaking.” She answered crisply, straightening her shoulders as she prepared for the upcoming battle.

“JJ, hi.” A familiar male voice answered her warmly.

JJ frowned thoughtfully as she tried to place the voice. It wasn’t her dad, or Todd.

“It’s Tony,” The man continued. “Uh, Tony Dinozzo.”

JJ’s heart leapt excitedly. “Tony! When did you get back!”

“About an hour ago.” Tony said, sounding faintly embarrassed. “Is now a good time?
“Of course,” JJ answered quickly, standing up to close her door. She didn’t want anyone to interrupt this conversation. “You know, I was just thinking about you and then my phone rang.”

“How much we could use someone like you on this case.” JJ admitted. “And how much I missed you.” Which wasn’t strictly true but, if Tony ringing hadn’t interrupted her thought process, she was sure that would have been where her thoughts would have ended up. They always did these days.

There was a terrifyingly long pause, before Tony spoke again. “I missed you too.”

JJ searched his tone to find any insincerity to match the long pause - what if he’d just said it to be polite? - but if anything he sounded delighted.

“What is the case?” Tony asked.

“There’s an undercover FBI agent missing in Baltimore.” JJ answered, trusting Tony to keep the information safe. “The current theory is that a psychopathic mob hitman has him.”

“Who’s the hitman?”

“We don’t know.”

“Who’s the mob boss then?”

“Michael Rosso.” JJ answered from memory. “He owns a scrapyard in Baltimore.”

“Michael Rosso?” Tony repeated. “Are you sure?”

JJ frowned and quickly brought up the file on her computer. “Yes. Michael Andrea Rosso, born the twelfth of March nineteen sixty eight. Isn’t Andrea a girls’ name?”
“Not to Italians.” Tony answered. “Listen, JJ, can I ring you back in a few minutes?”

“Sure.” JJ blinked in surprise at the suddenness of the request. “Is everything alright?”

“Everythings fine.” Tony assured her. “I’ll ring you back in, uh, fifteen minutes tops.”

JJ opened her mouth to say something, and then closed it again when she realised that Tony had already hung up. It was strange, and definitely out of character for Tony. His phone etiquette had been completely perfect for the three weeks they had dated before he’d left to be Agent Afloat. What had she said to cause him to react like that?

It took almost fourteen minutes for JJ’s phone to ring again (not that she had been counting or anything), and JJ scrambled to answer the phone.

“Agent Jareau.”

“Hey, JJ,” Tony’s friendly tone was a balm to the fourteen anxious minutes JJ had spent waiting for his call. “Sorry about that, I just had to call someone over at your guys’ Organised Crime Unit.”

JJ frowned. “Cramer?”

“Who?” Tony asked. “No, Agent Morris. I worked with him a few years ago. Anyway, I’m on my way into your offices now to give your team a hand with this case.”

JJ winced at the thought. Sure she’d wished they had someone like Tony, but they were already having enough problems working with the Baltimore Organised Crime Unit. She really doubted Gideon would be happy to have another person involved.

“Oh, uh,” JJ searched her mind for something she could say to discourage him.

Tony chuckled quietly. “Relax, JJ, I’m not going to get in the middle of things, but I’ve worked with Rosso before. Listen, who would be the best person to talk to about this?”
“About what?” JJ asked, feeling a bit lost. “You worked with Rosso?”

“About me going undercover with Rosso to figure out where the missing agent is.” Tony explained patiently.

JJ shook her head to try and clear her thoughts. She couldn’t let Tony’s involvement make her inefficient. She had to treat this like any other inter-agency liaison.

“Can I put you on hold for a few minutes?” She asked, standing up and moving towards her door

“Sure.” Tony answered easily. “You can ring me back if you like. I’m about thirty minutes out, providing the traffic is relatively clear.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll talk to you soon.” JJ ended the call, as she opened her door and quickly walked towards the meeting room where she knew at least some of the team would be gathered.

It was a relief to see that Hotch and Morgan were both there.

“JJ,” Hotch started, as soon as he saw her. “I just got a phone call from the Team Leader of our Organised Crime Unit. He’s sending a NCIS agent who he’s worked with in the past to help us. Apparently this agent has had past dealing with Rosso.”

JJ couldn’t help but feel relieved that she wouldn’t have to be the one to break the news. “I just got off the phone with Agent Dinozzo. He’s on his way, but he’s asked to speak to you.”

Morgan’s eyebrows rose. “Agent Tony Dinozzo?”

“You know him?” Hotch asked interestedly.

“Not too well,” Morgan admitted. “But JJ does. He’s the new guy she’s been dating. I thought he was still overseas?”
“He got back today.” JJ explained quickly, smiling at the reminder that Tony had rung her within hours of getting home. “So, can I ring him back and put him on speakerphone?”

“Of course.” Hotch agreed.

JJ stepped forward and dialled Tony’s number on the phone on the table which she knew had better speaker capabilities than her cellphone.

“Tony Dinozzo speaking.”

“Agent Dinozzo?” Hotch asked, stepping closer to the phone. “This is SSA Hotchner, with the BAU. I’m here with SSA Morgan, and Agent Jareau.”

“It’s nice to put a voice to the name, Agent Hotchner.” Tony’s voice came through the phone’s speakers. “JJ’s talked about you.”

Hotch glanced towards JJ with an indecipherable impression before turning back to the phone. “Agent Morris said that you will be able to assist us on our case.”

“Yes,” Tony answered simply. “I worked with Rosso in the past.”

“What did NCIS want with a small time mob boss from Baltimore?” Morgan asked, from where his hip was leaning against the table.

“Nothing, but before I was an NCIS agent, I was a cop.” Tony paused. “Everything I’m about to tell you is need-to-know. Thankfully, Morris has agreed that, due to the risk to the missing agent, you all need to know.”

“Understood, Agent Dinozzo.”

“You will have heard of Mike Macaluso?” Tony asked.

JJ frowned in thought. Why did that name sound familiar?
“Head of the Macaluso Family.” Morgan answered JJ’s unspoken question. “He was arrested about a decade ago, along with the majority of his lieutenants. The family was based out of Baltimore. Rosso worked for him for a while.”

“Also my cousin.” Tony added. “It’s a distant relation - second cousin, several times removed - but it was close enough for the FBI to shoulder tap me before I’d even finished at the Police Academy to go undercover in Macaluso’s organisation.”

“You were the one to take him down?” Morgan sounded impressed. “You know they’ve started using that case as study material for new agents?”

“Really?” Tony groaned. “Now I feel old.”

Hotch cleared his throat. “How long did you spend undercover?”

“Seventeen months.” Tony answered, switching back to the professional tone he’d been using for most of the phone call. “It took me that long to find enough evidence to ensure a conviction. I worked with Rosso for most of that time.”

Hotch was frowning thoughtfully. “In what capacity.”

“It took me a couple of months to win Macaluso’s trust, but he eventually made me one of his lieutenants. Rosso worked for me.”

“Did you ever hear of a hitman who was maybe a little too thorough?” Morgan asked, glancing towards the whiteboard that had a lot more photos on it than the last time JJ had seen it. “One who liked torture a little too much?”

“Vinny.” Tony answered immediately. “I don’t know his last name. I don’t think anyone really does. He was Macaluso’s guy first. Served as a very effective deterrent for anyone considering to cross him. I wonder how Rosso managed to bring him to heel.”

“What can you tell us about Rosso?” Hotch asked, moving to sit at the table.
“He’s a stone-faced liar. Definitely lacking in empathy, but then all the guys in that line of work are to some degree or another. He was a small fish ten years ago. If we hadn’t been able to take Macaluso down, I doubt Rosso would have ever made it far up the food chain. He was just lacking...charisma. Not the sort of man that people lay their lives down for.”

“So how is he running his own mob, then?” Morgan frowned thoughtfully.

“Power vacuum.” Tony answered simply, before elaborating. “We didn’t just get Macaluso we crippled the entire Family. There was hardly anyone left, and certainly no one who could hold the operation together, so they scattered. There were about four different small-time mobs that set up shop within a year of Macaluso’s arrest. Rosso was one of them.”

“So how did he get a guy like Vinny?” Morgan wondered aloud.

“No idea. Maybe he gained some charisma, maybe he offered a better paycheck.”

“Or more victims.” Morgan suggested. “Vinny likes to kill. He would have chosen the role that would give him the most opportunity to do so.”

Hotch rubbed at his forehead, looking tired. “Do you have any suggestions on how we might find this Vinny, Agent Dinozzo?”

“Morris didn’t tell you?” Tony asked, sounding surprised. “I’m going to go undercover and confront Rosso. Hopefully he knows where Vinny is. Otherwise, I’ll just have to convince him to contact Vinny so that we can bring him in and question him.”

Morgan looked startled. “Your cover is still intact? Didn’t you work in Baltimore a few years ago?”

“I took my Grandmother’s name when I was undercover.” Tony explained. “It was part of my backstory of repudiating my father. Rosso knows me as Tony Macaluso.”

“And nobody recognised your face?”
There was a few seconds of silence before Tony answered. “I’m good at what I do. Tony Macaluso was cold and brutal. Anyone who thought they recognised my face changed their mind pretty quickly.”

“And you think you’ll be able to switch back to being Tony Macaluso that easily?” Morgan sounded concerned. “Ten years is a long time.”

“I’m sure of it.” Tony said confidently. “But I won’t be able to go in alone. I’ll need several agents to act as my bodyguards. Preferably Italian, and the larger the better. They’ll need to be able to play the role too.”

“Luca Marino should be able to pull it off.” Morgan said immediately. “He’s in our Organised Crime Unit, rather than the Baltimore one. Also, John Matthews. I don’t know if he’s actually Italian, but he’s built like a tree and has undercover experience. Do you need a third?”

“Would you mind if I pulled in a guy from NCIS?”

“If it gets Baker back, and doesn’t weaken our case against Vinny and Rosso you can pull in as many NCIS agents as you need.” Hotch told him. “We’ll need to move quickly. We don’t know how long Baker has.”

“I’m about ten minutes away from your building now, but if you like I can turn around and head to Baltimore now.” Tony offered. “Can you get Marino and Matthews in Baltimore within the next ninety minutes?”

“Yes,” Hotch jerked his head at Morgan, who quickly moved towards the door. “Morgan will get them now. We’ll meet you at the Baltimore Field Office. I presume you can get the NCIS agent there?”

“Yes, I’ll ring him now.” Tony promised. “I look forward to meeting you in person, Agent Hotcher.”

Chapter End Notes

I'M MOVING!! As in, I am currently travelling between the town that I have lived in for 21 years, and the town that I am going to be living from now on. It's exciting and a little surreal! Not to mention, more than a little distracting - so this will probably be the
last chapter for a few weeks. Sorry.
As Tony had expected, Asher was more than willing to act as one of Tony’s lieutenants for the show they were going to put on for Rosso. It was a comforting thought. Tony knew that his friend would be able to convincingly pull off the role. Admittedly, Asher was of Spanish descent rather than Italian, but his colouring and facial structure were close enough to leave people guessing. Hopefully the agents the FBI were providing would be just as convincing.

It was strange to be driving into Baltimore again, almost like Deja Vu. Tony had been back a few times since leaving NCIS, of course, but never with the intention of going undercover as Tony Macaluso. Of course, he was a different man now than he had been when he’d first gone undercover. Then he’d been an inexperienced, nerve-riddled rookie. Now he had more than thirteen years of law enforcement experience under his belt.

None of the BAU team were at the FBI’s Baltimore Field Office when Tony arrived, but one of them must have rung ahead because he was met at the entrance by a junior agent who led him up to the Organised Crime Unit’s office.

“Agent Balboa should be here in a few minutes.” Tony told the agent, as they entered the office.

An older agent snorted at that. “As though one Navy cop wasn’t enough.”

“Shut up, Moore.” A third agent snapped, stepping forward to offer Tony his hand. “Agent Dinozzo, it’s a privilege to meet you.”

Tony shook the man’s hand, carefully masking his skepticism. A privilege to meet him? Was the agent just trying to butter him up?

“Thank you, Agent…?”

“Josh Cramer.” The agent answered Tony’s unspoken question quickly. “I was a probationary agent under Agent Morris when you first went undercover here. I’m the Head of the Organised Crime Division now. I can’t tell you how relieved I was to hear that you were going to be assisting us today.”

Tony really didn’t know what to say to that. It was strange enough to think that anyone might feel
privileged to meet him, let alone for it to be the agent in charge of a whole division.

“I’m glad to be able to help out.” Tony told him sincerely. “What can you tell me about Rosso’s organisation? I’m still struggling to understand how he managed to get his own crew. Thirteen years ago I would have bet that he’d never be anything more than another man’s foot soldier.”

Cramer’s jaw tightened, and he waved Tony towards one of the seats around the large table in the middle of the room. “Rosso’s a real piece of work. The best we can figure it, he’d killed off a most of his competition before the dust settled. Conti, Ricci, and the Rizzo brothers were all dead within two months of Macaluso’s arrest.”

“And you think Rosso killed them?” Tony asked in surprise, leaning back in his chair. He’d heard about the deaths, of course, but as far as he was aware they were still unsolved.

Cramer shook his head. “It’s our best guess, but we haven’t managed to get anyone close enough to confirm it.”

“Which is why you wanted to get Baker in.” Tony concluded.

Cramer nodded sharply. “Everything was going well, until one of the local detective’s made him in a bar last night. Jimmy rang me and asked for an extraction, but then he never showed up.”

“I don’t get why Rosso put a hit out on him so quickly.” One of the other agents in the room commented. “Jimmy’s no rookie. No way he broke character in the bar. Besides, he hadn’t even met Rosso yet.”

“Rosso’s not the one in charge.” Tony answered, as the pieces suddenly came together in his head. “Not really. He’s just the front man. Vinny’s the one with the power, except Vinny doesn’t care about anything except getting his rocks off torturing and killing people. So Rosso does the paperwork and deals with the personnel issues, all with the threat of Vinny backing him up.”

There was a long silence, before Cramer spoke. “Who the hell is Vinny?”

“He was Macaluso’s hitman, though not exclusively.” Tony explained. “I only met him a few times. Paranoid bastard.”
“So if Vinny’s running the plays, how the hell do we convince Rosso to give him up?”

“Vinny’s not running the plays,” Tony disagreed. “He doesn’t have the patience. He’s just the power behind Rosso’s throne.”

“Which helps us how?” Cramer was starting to look frustrated.

“We play to his weaknesses.” Tony explained simply. “Every man wants to believe that he can be the power behind his own throne.”

16-16-16

JJ could barely contain her excitement at the idea of seeing Tony again and, given the smirks Morgan kept sending her way, it was obvious. They drove to Baltimore in convoy, Marino and Matthews’ presence making it necessary to take three SUVs (especially considering that they each took up a seat and a half), and then made their way up to the Organised Crime Unit’s office as a team.

Tony was already there and the sight of him made JJ’s heart flutter excitedly. He really was a sight for sore eyes, and not just because of how gorgeous he looked in his grey suit and black shirt and tie.

“Hi.” Tony greeted her with a soft smile, and it was all JJ could do not to throw herself into his arms.

JJ could feel her smile stretching across her face. “Hi.”

Tony turned his attention towards Hotch and Gideon then. He introduced himself, and then shook hands with each member of the team as Hotch introduced them. JJ could feel her cheeks heating as he shook her hand, his eyes meeting her’s heatedly. Clearly he wanted to kiss her as much as she wanted to kiss him. JJ couldn’t wait to get him alone.

Elle was next and JJ couldn’t help herself from bristling when the other agent eyed Tony speculatively
“So you’re Dinozzo.” She commented meaningfully.

JJ rolled her eyes. Surely if she’d been able to prevent herself from kissing Tony, and Morgan had managed not to make any comment about her and Tony’s relationship, Elle could have attempted to have some discretion.

Tony didn’t look very impressed either, but he moved onto the final two agents without a comment. “You must be Agents Marino and Matthews.”

“Yes, sir.” Marino agreed, shaking Tony’s hand. “I’m Agent Marino.”

“Agent Matthews.” Matthews added.

“Good to meet you.” Tony nodded. “Do either of you have any experience going undercover with the mob?”

“Yes, sir.” Matthew answered, while Marino shook his head.

“Have you ever worked undercover before, Agent Marino?” Tony asked then.

Marino looked apologetic. “No.”

“Are you an expressive person?”

“Uh,” Marino looked a bit confused. “I don’t think so.”

“What would you do if there were suddenly ten guns pointed at you.”

JJ winced as Marino’s entire body betrayed his discomfort at the thought. That wasn’t good.

Tony sighed. “I’m sorry for bringing you all the way out here, Agent Marino, but I can’t let you
walk in there with me. The stakes are too high.”

Marino looked relieved, but Elle made a quiet scoffing noise.

JJ glared at her, and she wasn’t the only one.

Cramer looked particularly incensed. “You think you could do better, Agent Greenaway? I don’t even know what you’re all doing here. Dinozzo’s already been twice as much help as you.”

“Balboa should be here any minute.” Tony said quickly, before Elle could react to Cramer’s words. “Matthews, you need a wardrobe change. You look like a fed. Cramer, where will Rosso be in forty minutes?”

“He’s at the bar at the moment.” One of Cramer’s agents answered. “Who knows where he’ll go after that.”

Tony looked gleeful. “A bar is perfect! We’ll need to do it as soon as possible and hopefully he’s still there. Someone needs to get Matthews a suit in the next ten minutes, and if you have any tech you want us wearing we’ll need that in that timeframe too. And someone needs to make sure that there isn’t any law enforcement in the bar.”

Once everyone had bustled into action, JJ stepped away from her team and into one of the corners with the hope that Tony would follow her. She wasn’t disappointed.

“Hi,” Tony said again, leading down to brush a gentle kiss against her lips.

“Hi.” JJ answered, wrapping her arms around him in a hug. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too.” Tony agreed, hugging her back. “Your brother says hi.”

JJ tilted her head back so that she could see his face, without letting go. “You spoke to him then?”

“Briefly.” Tony looked a little uncomfortable. “He gave me a letter to give to you. I left it at home
“You can give it to me later.” JJ commented, releasing Tony and stepping back. She was pretty sure they had already crossed the boundaries of appropriate workplace displays of affection.

“Definitely.” Tony agreed with a smile. “We should have dinner.”

“At my place maybe?” JJ suggested hopefully. “I never did teach you how to make pizza.”

Tony’s smile widened. “That sounds perfect.”

“That’s motivation to close a case quickly if I’ve ever heard one.” JJ commented, reaching forward to take Tony’s hand in hers.

Tony winced. “I can’t do tonight though, even if we do close the case. I promised Asher I’d have dinner with him and Barb.”

JJ’s stomach twisted in disappointment, but she forced her smile to stay in place. “Tomorrow night then.”

“Unless,” Tony paused, and his adam’s apple wobbled. “Unless you wanted to come to dinner tonight. Asher and Barb wouldn’t mind. You could meet Barb and get to know Asher.”

“I’d love that.” JJ felt as though her heart was soaring. “Wait, I haven’t met Asher either, have I?”

“Not yet.” Tony grinned, glancing towards the door. “But he’d better arrive sometime in the next five minutes or I’m going to leave him behind.”

16-16-16

Everything proceeded quickly when Asher finally arrived (two minutes after Tony’s ten minute deadline) and within five minutes the two of them and Matthews were on route to the bar where Rosso was.
There hadn’t been nearly as much prep time as Tony would have preferred, but the opportunity to confront him in public was too good to pass up. Besides, at least they had the ten minute car ride to make sure they were all on the same page.

Striding into the dark bar as Tony Macaluso felt disturbingly familiar, and Tony was discomforted to realise that there was a part of him that had missed the power and prestige that he’d had as a Macaluso.

He paused near the door for a moment, allowing Asher and Matthews to catch up, and used the time to observe the room. He recognised half a dozen of the men as having worked for Macaluso back in the day, but most of the faces in the room were new to him. Which wasn’t really surprising given that most of them would have still been in highschool when Tony had taken Macaluso down.

Slowly making his way through the bar, Tony allowed himself to smirk with satisfaction as the volume level gradually dropped until the only noise in room came from Tony, Asher and Matthews’ shoes on the wooden floor. Every eye in the bar was on him and, as Tony approached Rosso’s table, he could see that the mob boss was looking discomforted.

“Rosso.” Tony greeted flatly, stopping in front of the table.

Rosso looked ridiculous, like a lackey playing at being a mob boss - and not just because he was sitting in a throne-like chair. Tony didn’t even bother hiding his sneer at the older man shifted slightly in his chair.

“Do I know you?” Rosso asked casually, though Tony could hear the unsureness in his tone.

“You don’t recognise me?” Tony asked with pseudo lightness. He pulled a knife out of the holster in his sleeve and slammed it into wooden table less than an inch from where Rosso’s hand was lying. “How about now?”

The bodyguard hovering behind Rosso had his gun pointed at Tony in seconds, and Tony had no doubt that there were at least half a dozen more pointed at his back.

Rosso yanked his hand off the table as though it had been burnt and Tony could see the fear in his eyes. He smirked again as he realised that, of the two of them, Rosso was the one who would look the most concerned. Which was a bit odd really, given the number of guns Tony had pointed at him.
“Tony Macaluso?” Rosso asked, his voice filled with false bravado. “I thought you were dead.”

Tony scoffed and, ignoring the guns, settled himself comfortably in the second seat at the table. It wasn’t nearly as majestic as Rosso’s chair, but then he didn’t need a chair to make himself look intimidating.

“You mean you hoped I was dead.”

The bodyguard behind Rosso looked confused and, from his new position, Tony could see that the men he’d recognised were slowly lowering their guns. Clearly they recognised him too.

Rosso’s adam’s apple wobbled. “Last I’d heard your family had closed up shop. Something to do with Mike getting a sixty five year sentence.”

“Yes, that was a bit unfortunate.” Tony agreed, before pointedly glancing around the bar. “You seem to have done well though. I had no idea my absence had created such a desperate situation. Last time I saw you, you were still struggling to get my coffee order right.”

Rosso jerked at the insult. “Well, the last time I saw you was just a few hours before your entire family was arrested. Rumour has it, you turned them in.”

Tony barked out a cold laugh. “Oh, Mikey, you really shouldn’t believe everything you hear. Do you think I’d still be alive if I’d betrayed Uncle Mike?”

Rosso squared his jaw, apparently having regained some of his confidence. “Well, then. Spin us a tale, Macaluso. Where the hell have you been?”

Tony raised a mocking eyebrow. “You’re giving me orders now, Rosso?”

“You’re in my bar, Macaluso.”

“True,” Tony acknowledged, sneering as he glanced around. “It’s not much, is it? But then, from
what I’ve heard, the same can be heard about your organisation. You’ve got a nice chair there though. Really strikes terror into the heart. Pity you can’t do that without a chair to help you.”

Rosso surged his feet and slammed his hands down on the table - Tony’s knife still sticking up in the table between them. The bodyguard behind him shifted slightly so that he still had a clear shot at Tony, but Tony noted that no one else was reaching for their gun. Well, aside from Matthews who now had his gun aimed at Rosso’s head.

“What the hell are you doing here, Macaluso.” Rosso snapped, looking more than a little shaken. “This is my town now!”

Tony leant back in his chair and pulled a second knife out of his second sleeve. Tony Macaluso’s signature weapon had been his knives, and he’d rarely been seen without one in his hand. They were handy things to have. One second you could be fiddling with the knife, spinning on your hand, tossing it in the air, and the next second it could be buried in someone else’s hand, or chest, or groin.

“Your town?” Tony chuckled, as he weaved the knife between his fingers. “Rosso, at best you own the bar and the scrapyard, but only if we all pretend that it doesn’t all really belong to Vinny. Do you at least manage to get his coffee order right?”

Rosso’s face was turning red in his fury. “You little bastard! Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I’m a Macaluso.” Tony answered flatly. “And this is our town.”

“You haven’t held this town since your uncle got thrown into jail.” Rosso spat.

“Not personally, no.” Tony agreed. “But then I haven’t needed to. I’ve had Luca, Marcus, and Vinny to look after it for me.”

“This is my mob!” Rosso shouted, slamming his hand back onto the table for emphasis. “Vinny works for me.”

Tony scoffed. “You’re deluded if you really believe that.”
For a moment Rosso looked as though he was going to dive across the table and attack Tony, but then he seemed to pull his fury back in.

“Get out!” He spat.

Tony scoffed. “Shut up and sit down, Rosso.”

“Get out or you’ll be leaving in body bags!”

“You and what army?” Tony asked, standing to his feet and looking around the room. The only two people with their guns out were Rosso’s bodyguard and Matthews, and none of the other men in the room were making any kind of movement towards their guns. Clearly the Macaluso name still held more weight than Rosso wanted it to.

He turned back towards Rosso, before smoothly throwing his knife so that it embedded itself in the bodyguard’s wrist. The bodyguard groaned at the sudden pain, and dropped his gun.

“Sit down, Rosso.” Tony repeated harshly. “Before I have Stefano put a bullet in your kneecap.”

Rosso sat. “Tony…”

“Shut up.” Tony snapped, yanking his first knife out of the table. “I thought I was being generous, Rosso. I left you here, allowed you and Vinny to look after this corner of my city, and what did you do? You killed my cousins!!”

The colour drained from Rosso’s face. “What? No, we wouldn’t have.”

“William, Helen, and Freddy Condore.” Tony answered coldly.

Rosso shook his head desperately. “They weren’t connected to any family.”

“Helen was my third cousin.” Tony corrected. “One of my favourites.”
“They were conspiring with a cop!” Rosso blurted out desperately.

Tony scoffed. “Said who? Vinny? He’s a paranoid bastard. Always has been, always will be. Well, at least, he will be for the rest of his very short life.”

Rosso’s expression froze for a moment. “You want Vinny?”

“I want vengeance! The way I see it, that includes you. After all, Vinny works for you, right?”

“No,” Rosso shook his head. “We’re, we’re partners. It was all Vinny’s idea.”

“Perhaps,” Tony shrugged, and glanced around the room. “But Vinny’s not here, is he?”

“I can tell you where he is.” Rosso promised eagerly. “He lives in Glen Burnie. Seventeen Wendover Road.”

“And how would you know that?” Tony asked skeptically. “I know how paranoid Vinny is.”

“I had him followed.” Rosso admitted quickly. “He’ll be there. I swear.”

Tony eyed him silently, enjoying the sight of Rosso sweating. “If he’s not…”

“He is!”

Tony nodded slowly, as he got to his feet. “Don’t make me come back for you, Rosso. You won’t like what happens if I do.”
Chapter 17

It had been more than two hours since Tony’s conversation with Rosso, but JJ could still hardly believe how quickly he’d manage to solve their case. She’d never had much opportunity to observe an undercover operation before, and so had doubted how effective Tony’s involvement in the case would be. She hadn’t been able to imagine what Tony could possibly say or do to convince Rosso to give up Vinny.

Even Gideon would have needed several days to somehow maneuver Rosso into giving them Vinny’s location, and Gideon was a legend. The top of his field. So much so, that he still managed to regularly confound Reid and Morgan with his intuitive leaps of logic.

JJ had known that Tony was a good agent, and a great actor, but she’d never considered that he might be as exceptional as Gideon. Except, apparently she had been underestimating him because within fifteen minutes of entering the bar, Tony had somehow managed to get Rosso to give them Vinny’s street address.

JJ glanced across the vehicle towards where Tony was driving them both to Agent Balboa’s house for dinner. He looked so normal - so Tony like. It was hard to believe that a few hours ago he’d thrown a knife at a man’s wrist and intimidated a mob boss into giving up his partner.

Though, having heard the recording of Tony’s interaction with Rosso, JJ didn’t blame Rosso for feeling threatened. Tony’s acting had made the hair on the back of her neck stand up, and she’d only been able to hear their voices.

It was amazing how much Tony’s voice had changed when he had played the part of Tony Macaluso. He’d sounded like a different man. There was a coldness to his tone, an arrogance that JJ had never heard before. JJ could understand why Tony had been able to work in Baltimore and not be recognised as his undercover persona. If he could control his body language as effectively as he could change his voice, no one would draw a connection between the two Tonys.

“Is everything alright?” Tony asked, his eyes darting towards her before returning to the road.

JJ could feel her face flushing as she realised that she had been caught staring. “Sorry, I was just thinking about how amazing you were this afternoon.”

Tony’s glanced towards her again. “I know that Tony Macaluso can be a bit hard to process.” He said carefully. “I’ll understand if you want me to take you home.”

JJ blinked, that hadn’t even crossed her mind. “I know the difference between your undercover persona and the real you, Tony. I’m not scared of you.”

Tony gave a half shrug. “I did put a knife through Bruno’s wrist. He’ll probably never recover full use of his hand.”

“But Agent Baker will make a complete recovery.” JJ retorted. “Tony, I wasn’t thinking anything bad about what you did this afternoon. My thoughts were more along the lines of how incredible you were, and how you deserve to be as much of a legend as Gideon.”

Tony’s expression was incredulous. “A legend? JJ, I didn’t do anything that any experienced agent could do. I just happened to be the one with an ‘in’ with Rosso.”

JJ stared at him in disbelief. She remembered Paula telling her that Tony seemed to go out of his
way to cover up his potential, but this was more than that. It was almost as though Tony didn’t know how good he was.

“Tony, there’s no one in my team that could have done what you just did.”

“Of course not.” Tony agreed. “They haven’t spent over a year cementing their identity as a Macaluso.”

JJ sighed as she tucked her hair behind her left ear. “Did you know that Morgan spent two years undercover in Chicago?”

“No.”

“He told me that not even he could have pulled off what you did today.” JJ reported. “You didn’t just pretend to be Tony Macaluso, you knew exactly how to play Rosso so that he’d give you what you wanted. You profiled him.”

Tony was starting to look uncomfortable. “That wasn’t profiling. Profiling is what your team does. What Kate used to do. I was just applying the pressure to Rosso’s weak spot.”

JJ opened her mouth, ready to argue her case, before shutting it again with a sigh. There was no point in trying to convince Tony of something that he didn’t want to hear.

“We can agree to disagree.” She proposed, before searching her mind for a topic of conversation that wouldn’t make Tony look so uncomfortable. “Tell me about Agent Balboa and his wife.”

Tony’s expression lit up. “Asher and Barb have been having me over for dinner for years. A couple of weeks after I started at NCIS, Asher and I somehow ended up playing some ball together. Eventually Barb decided that she wanted to meet me and so instructed Asher to invite me over for dinner. Her cooking was so good that I couldn’t stay away.”

“What does Barb do?”

“She’s a first grade teacher.” Tony answered, as he indicated right before turning them off the motorway. “I can’t imagine anything worse than teaching children to count to five, but she loves it.”

“I can think of worse.” JJ commented lightly, as Tony steered them into suburbia. Other than her family, she didn’t know many people who lived in an actual house. Most of her friends and colleagues lived in apartments like she did. There was something settled about living in the suburbs - in that people only tended to do it when they got married and had children.

JJ forced herself to keep her attention on the view outside the window as her thoughts were suddenly filled with the image of her and Tony moving into the suburbs together. The longing that accompanied the image stabbed at her heart and JJ hoped Tony couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

“Such as…?”

“Uh,” JJ’s mind raced she tried to remember what they had been talking about. She’d much rather answer that question than one about what had distracted her. “Dog walker. Nurse. Going out on one of those long fishing expeditions like in ‘Deadliest Catch’.”

“You don’t like dogs?”

“I don’t like pets.” JJ answered flatly, before worriedly turning towards Tony as it occurred to her that he might dream of owning one. “But I could live with one, if I had to. What about you?”
Tony looked faintly amused. “I despise anything bigger, and more complicated than a fish. I have a fish by the way, its name is Archibald.”

Archibald?” JJ laughed.

Tony shrugged. “It seemed to fit. Why not a nurse?”

“You’re not going to ask me why I don’t want to be an extra for ‘Deadliest Catch’?”

“I think that one is fairly obvious.” Tony grinned.

“But not wanting to spend my life wiping people’s bottoms and cleaning up their vomit isn’t?”

Tony grimaced. “Well, when you put it like that. Though I reckon you’d give a pretty decent sponge bath.”

JJ rolled her eyes. “What is it with guys and sponge baths? Wouldn’t you rather have shower sex? At least then I’d be naked too.”

Tony let out a surprised laugh as he pulled the car into a driveway that belonged to a gray house with actual roses outside of it. “Yes, yes, I would.”

17-17-17

It wasn’t until JJ had been ushered into the house by a smiling Asher, and been hugged by a even smiley-er Barb, that it occurred to her that this dinner was sort of a ‘meet-the-family’ event. She suddenly had a lot more sympathy for the reluctance Tony had felt about introducing himself to Todd while on the USS Reagan.

Tony’s comfort in the situation was obvious. He’d bent down to hug Barb, before plopping himself down on one of the bar-stools and gesturing for JJ to do the same.

“Dinner will be later than normal, sorry, JJ.” Barb commented, as she returned to slicing the red peppers that were lying on a board on the bench. “I’d apologise to you too, Tony, but there’s not much point in apologising when it’s your fault.”

“My fault?” Tony adopted an injured expression, his hand resting dramatically on his heart. “I’ve only just arrived.”

“Yes, so has Asher.” Barb’s dry tone was at odds with her grin.

“We did catch the bad guy though.” Asher said brightly, from where he was emptying the dishwasher. “Well, not us exactly. But we helped.”

“And we saved an agent’s life.” Tony added.

“Besides, it’s Tony’s first night back.” Asher reminded her. “You can’t blame Tony for anything on his first night back!”

Barb laughed. “The two of you sound just like my first graders. Tony, why don’t you put together an antipasto platter for us to enjoy while dinner’s cooking. Do you like cheese, JJ?”

JJ blinked in surprise at her sudden inclusion into the conversation. “It depends on what kind of cheese.”

“Smelly cheese.” Asher grimaced, as Tony pulled a large platter out of a cupboard. “Weird, stinky,
smelly cheese.”

Barb rolled her eyes. “It’s just blue cheese today. Normally I try and branch out a bit more than that, but I decided to get my nails done last week.”

JJ looked down at Barb’s bright purple nails curiously. “They look great. Where did you have them done?”

“Georgies.” Barb answered with a smile. “It’s a small place a few blocks away from my school. I don’t go very often, but sometimes it’s nice just to feel pampered.”

“Yes, it is.” JJ agreed. “I’m more of a pedicure girl myself. That way I can get bright sparkly colors without looking unprofessional at work. Aren’t you worried that your nails will get chipped by the knife?”

“They’ll chip when they chip.” Barb shrugged. “I’m a first grade teacher, it’s not as though I can live my life in silk gloves. They’d be soiled in an hour.”

“Not to mention that you can hardly drink anything without spilling it at least once.” Asher put in.

Barb laughed, as she set aside the red pepper and began slicing a pile of mushrooms. “Too true. You know it’s bad when there are first graders who are more co-ordinated than you are.”

“So, JJ,” Asher started, setting four wine glasses on the bench beside where Barb was working. “Tell us about yourself.”

“Asher!” Tony protested, spooning green olives into a bowl. “I didn’t bring her here to be interrogated!”

“But I haven’t interrogated anyone in weeks!” Asher whined. “I miss it.”

Barb elbowed her husband in the hip. “Be nice.”

JJ grinned at their antics. “What is that you want to know?”

“Hmmm,” Asher’s expression was almost predatory. “Do you want children?”

“Asher!”

JJ laughed. “Yes.”

“Ooooh,” Asher turned towards Tony. “Do you hear that, Tony?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “I already knew that, Asher.”

Asher looked between them. “Really? You’ve already had the children conversation?”

“Second date.” JJ confirmed.

“Alright, then,” Asher grinned wolfishly. “What kind of wedding do you want?”

JJ met Tony’s eyes and tried not to blush as she imagined their wedding. She didn’t think she cared what kind of wedding it was, just so long as it happened one day. Though a smallish wedding would be nice, with lots of dancing afterwards. She’d wear white, and she could put her bridesmaids in…

“Asher!” Barb elbowed her husband again. “No more questions out of you. Don’t answer that, JJ.
Ignoring Asher was easy, ignoring the thoughts Asher’s question had sparked was a lot harder.

“How have you been, Barb?” Tony asked, setting the antipasto platter he’d been working on near JJ and settling back onto the bar-stool beside her.

“Help yourself, JJ.” Barb commented. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Yes, thank you.” JJ answered, selecting toothpick with which to stab an olive with.

“I’ve been a bit sick, actually.” Barb answered Tony’s question, glancing over to where Asher had set the wine bottle down after only filling three glasses. “I’m most of the way through my first trimester and it seems I’ve inherited a tendency towards morning sickness from my mother.”

Tony’s face split into a wide smile. “You’re pregnant? That’s wonderful! Congratulations!”

“Thank you.” Both Barb and Asher looked as though they could burst with delight.

“When are you due?” JJ asked curiously.

“The first week of July.” Asher answered, filling the fourth glass with lemonade. “Shall I put in my leave form now, boss?”

Tony laughed as he shook his head. “Don’t call me boss, Asher, or I’ll start calling you Balboa.”

“Yes, sir!” Balboa gave a lazy salute, before pushing a wine glass over to both Tony and JJ.

“Thank you.” JJ acknowledged, before bringing the glass up to her lips and humming appreciatively.

“Asher and Barb know their wine.” Tony agreed. “Would you like some cheese, JJ?”

“No, thank you.” JJ answered a little more vehemently than she’d intended to.

“You don’t like smelly cheese, JJ?” Asher asked.

“Not so much.” JJ shook her head. “I don’t like anything stronger than a nice brie.”

“Yes!” Asher crowed victoriously. “I finally have an ally. Give me a high five, comrade!”

JJ eyed his raised hand suspicious for a few seconds, before tentatively bringing her own hand up to slap it.

“It’s even better than you know, Asher.” Tony commented. “She’s a Redskins fan. She even attends their games.”

“Be still my beating heart!” Asher proclaimed, stepping backwards as he performed a dramatic swoon. “Wherever did you find such a woman, Tony? She is all that the bards sing odes of!”

Barb reached out to whack her husband’s arm. “What am I, minced meat?”

Tony laughed loudly. “I think you mean ‘chopped liver’, Barb.”

Barb brandished the knife mock-threateningly. “I’ll make you ‘chopped liver’, Tony.”

“That’s if there’s anything left of his liver to chop.” Asher commented. “Haven’t you heard that wine is bad for your liver, Tony?”
“You’re one to talk.” Tony retorted. “Besides, I’ll have you know that I am very well known on the Reagan for my tea-totalling ways. I’m going down in history as the worst buzzkill that ship has ever had. I was like a one-man prohibition task force.”

“Seriously?” Asher asked, looking almost gleeful. “Tell me more.”

“Tell me more, like does he have a car?” Barb said, completely straight faced.

Asher turned to stare at her uncomprehendingly.

“Tell me more, tell me more, did you get very far?” JJ added, sharing an amused look with Barb.

“You know,” Asher started slowly. “I don’t think I like the fact that there are as many of them as there are of us. I think it was safer when we outnumbered Barb.”

“How do you not recognize that as a ‘Grease’ song?” Tony asked, incredulously.

“I’ve never seen ‘Grease’.”

“I’m sorry, what?!?” Tony looked horrified. “That’s it. I’m revoking our friendship, and you’re fired. I can’t work with someone who hasn’t seen ‘Grease’.”

“You’ve worked with Gibbs for how many years?” Asher asked rhetorically. “Besides, I wasn’t even in middle school when ‘Grease’ came out.”

“Neither were Barb and JJ and they’ve seen it.” Tony retorted.

“Because it’s a girly movie!”

Tony seemed to swell with indignation. “‘Grease’ is not a girly movie! It’s a classic!”

“So is ‘Gone with the Wind’, and it’s definitely a girly movie.”

Tony waved a hand dismissively. “‘Gone with the Wind’ is an undeserved classic. It doesn’t count.”

“You know, I actually own ‘Grease’,” Barb commented slyly. “I’ve never been able to convince Asher to watch it with me, but maybe between the three of us…”

“We can’t watch it tonight!” Asher protested. “JJ’s here.”

“JJ will be here again.” Barb countered calmly. “I’m sure we’ll have plenty of opportunities to get to know her.”

JJ glanced over at Tony to see what he thought of Barb’s comment, and was delighted to see no sign of disagreement in his expression. “I could watch ‘Grease’.”

“Then it’s decided,” Tony proclaimed. “Tonight, we watch ‘Grease’!”

Asher groaned dramatically. “I think my vote should count for two. It’s my house!”

“It’s our house.” Barb corrected him smugly. “And if anyone gets two votes, it should be me. One for me, and one for the baby.”
Chapter 18

The two weeks between Tony helping the FBI with their case and starting as the Team Leader of the second MCRT went by quicker than he would have liked. He’d spent the first week settling back into his apartment and completing all the odd jobs that had needed doing even before he’d gone afloat, and then spent Christmas and the second week mooched out on the couch watching movies and trying not to stress about the fact that he was about to be responsible for leading a team.

JJ had been horrified when he’d told her about his Christmas plans. She’d even invited him to Pennsylvania with her for the week, but Tony hadn’t had any qualms in turning her down. He didn’t know JJ nearly well enough to feel comfortable with the idea of spending a whole week with her family. Especially considering that JJ had thought Paula would be there. The last time Tony had seen Paula she’d been recovering from the injuries she’d gotten while working with their team, and he doubted her family would be all that impressed to meet one of the people who had failed to have her back.

Tony didn’t mind the solitude. There was something refreshing about settling down in front of the TV to watch a day’s worth of a Bond movies. Besides which, it gave him plenty of time to puzzle out what kind of Team Lead he wanted to be (and how he was going to handle the inevitable confrontations with his old team and Abby).

Still, none of Tony’s mental preparation helped his nerves when he walked into NCIS at eight hundred hours on Monday the second of January. He greeted the security guards as he usually did, responding cheerfully to their comments about having missed him, all the while trying desperately to keep the butterflies in his stomach from taking over his entire body.

Why had he ever thought that he could do this? He should have just stayed as Gibbs SFA, or quit and gone back to being a Police Detective. Anything would have been better than considering a position as Team Lead. What had made him think he could be in charge of people? What if none of them listened to him? What if they never solved any cases? What if…

“Good morning, Agent Dinozzo!”

Tony blinked in surprise as he realised that he had somehow gotten from the ground floor to Assistant Director Stewart’s office without noticing. Director Stewart’s assistant - Janet? Jules? Julie? Juliet? - was smiling up at him cheerily and Tony quickly forced himself to smile back.

“Good morning, Juliet!” Tony replied, and was relieved when the woman’s smile brightened. He must of remembered her name right.

“Assistant Director Stewart is ready for you.” Juliet informed him. “Can I get you some coffee?”

Tony wondered if his surprise at her offer was obvious. Nobody had ever offered to make him a coffee while he was meeting with a superior before. Was this a perk of being a Team Lead?

“I’d say yes, if I were you.” Juliet lowered her voice, as thought she was imparting a secret. “Director Stewart’s coffee is the best in the building. He is very particular about it.”

“And he won’t mind?” Tony confirmed carefully.

“See, if I make you coffee, then I make him coffee too.” Juliet explained, with a fond smile. “His doctor has restricted him to two coffees a day, but if you have one then he can tell himself that it was only polite to have a third one.”
Tony grinned. “How many cups of coffee does Director Stewart usually have?”

“More than I will ever admit to my doctor.” Stewart’s sounded from the door to his office.

Tony let out a startled laugh as he turned to greet the man. “Sorry, sir. Good morning.”

“Good morning, Agent Dinozzo.” Stewart returned. “No need to apologise. Now, can Juliet fetch you that coffee?”

“Yes, sir, thank you.” Tony answered. “White, with one sugar.”

“You won’t need any sugar to pollute my coffee, Dinozzo.” Stewart commented. “It’s nothing like that motor oil Gibbs is constantly putting through his veins. Two white sugarless coffees please, Juliet.”

“Yes, sir.” Juliet agreed, shooting Tony an apologetic smile. “I’ll bring them through to you in a few minutes.”

“Excellent,” Stewart turned towards his office. “Come on in, Dinozzo. You can leave the door open for now. It’ll make it easier for Juliet to bring our drinks through.”

Following Stewart into his office, Tony noted that everything looked exactly the same as it had during his first visit. Sitting in the same chair as he had before, Tony considered the photo in front of him.

“How are your grandchildren, sir?”

“Spoiled.” Stewart answered, though his tone was fond. “If there is ever a day to avoid children, Dinozzo, it’s Christmas. The younger ones are alright, but sometimes I want to take the older ones over my knee and teach them some gratitude. My eldest granddaughter, Alissa, was given a cellphone for a Christmas - can you believe that? - and rather than being thankful she started complaining that it wasn’t the one that she wanted. I’d of taken the cellphone right off her again if she’d been my daughter.”

Tony wasn’t really sure what to say. “Yes, sir.”

“Call me Paul, Dinozzo.” Stewart ordered. “You’re an Team Lead now, and I like to have a certain degree of familiarity with my Team Leads. I presume you have no objection to me calling you Tony?”

“No, Paul. Thank you.” Tony said, feeling a little numb with surprise. First coffee and now this?

Stewart nodded briskly. “Now, how would you say your time on the Reagan went?”

Tony’s stomach twisted nervously. “Well, I don’t think I made any friends.”

“It wasn’t your job to make friends.” Stewart reminded him. “Your job was to enforce Navy regulations and to solve any crimes that were committed on board, and you executed both tasks excellently. We could use a few more Agent Afloats like you.”

Tony didn’t like the sound of that. “You’re not going to send me back are you, sir?”

Stewart looked amused. “No, I’m not. Director Sheppard and I both agree that your skills are best utilized here in Washington. Speaking of which, how are you feeling about your new team?”

Tony opened his mouth to answer, before quickly closing it again when Juliet entered carrying two
“Two cups of white coffee without sugar.” She announced, setting the mugs down on the desk and winking at Tony.

“Thank you, Juliet.” Stewart dismissed her.

“Yes, thank you.” Tony agreed, bringing his mug up for a taste. It was very hot, and sweet as he liked it. Which explained Juliet’s wink - she must have added sugar to his mug after all.

“Good coffee, isn’t it?” Stewart asked. “See what I mean about the sugar?”

“Hmmm,” Tony responded noncommittally as he tasted it again.

Stewart chuckled. “It’s alright, Tony. I know she added the sugar to yours - some people just don’t understand how to drink coffee right. Now, you were about to tell me what you think of your new team?”

“They look good.” Tony answered. “Wardle’s very green, but given her military experience she should know how to follow orders. Her structure should balance out Francis’ spontaneity, and ideally he’ll be able to help train her. Teaching her should help him cement his own knowledge. Balboa is very experienced, and great in interrogation from what I hear.”

Stewart nodded. “Speaking of Balboa, good job in regards to your assisting the FBI last month.”

“Thank you.”

“That being said, I’d appreciate a phone call the next time the two of you decide to run rogue with the FBI.” Stewart added sternly.

“Sorry, sir.” Tony winced, he’d been so busy getting the permissions he needed from the FBI that he hadn’t even considered running the idea past NCIS. “I will.”

“Good then,” Stewart nodded. “Now, I’m giving you two days to put your team through their paces before you start taking cases. You’ll want to familiarise yourself with their capabilities, and perhaps lay some ground rules, before you’re thrown in the middle of a case. If you have any further problems with Miss Scuito, come and see me immediately. Any irregularity in the processing of evidence could cost us a conviction, and I will not allow that to happen on my watch. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Tony agreed, though the thought filled him with dread. He’d already dobbed Abby in once, he wasn’t sure that he could do it again.

“Paul.” Stewart reminded him

“Right.” Tony nodded, that was definitely going to take some getting used to.

“In fact, I want you to write me an incident report for every regulation breaking encounter that you have with any NCIS staff member.” Stewart ordered. “If Agent McGee or Officer David are insubordinate, write me a report. If Gibbs is confrontational, write me a report. If Gibbs physically assaults you in any way, write me a report.”

Tony shook his head. “I’m not a nark, Paul.”

“You’re a Team Lead now, Tony.” Stewart told him firmly. “That makes you partly responsible for the culture here at NCIS. You need to hold yourself, and the agents around you, accountable to the
regulations of our agency. Just like you did aboard the USS Reagan.”

“That was different.” Tony protested. “That was about sailors’ safety.”

“And this isn’t? Failure to follow NCIS regulation not only lessens the likelihood of conviction, so allowing dangerous criminals back onto the streets, but it damages junior agents. Despite your influence, Agent McGee’s career has been all but torpedoed by Gibbs’ example.”

“But…”

“You have a lot of potential, Tony.” Stewart started. “You could go far in NCIS, but I need to know that you will execute yourself as professionally, efficiently, and objectively as you did aboard the Reagan.”

Tony stared at him. What did Stewart mean by him going ‘far in NCIS’? He was a Team Lead now, that was quite far enough. Wasn’t it?

18-18-18

Tony was still turning Director Stewart’s words over in his head as he rode the elevator up to the bullpen to meet his new team. Stewart had made a good point, but Tony still wasn’t sure that he was comfortable with the idea of becoming the ‘bullpen nark’ - even if it was in the name of professional responsibility. Technically, he hadn’t policed every broken regulation on the USS Reagan. He’d ignored countless poker games and curfew violations - judging them to be relatively harmless - and, if two seamen hadn’t been poisoned by spoiled liquor, he probably would have ignored the amount of alcoholic contraband on the ship as well.

There was no way Tony was going to fill out an incident report for every broken regulation, but he could fill out reports for the ones that he thought had the potential to cause harm. Stewart would just have to deal with the compromise. Though, admittedly, Tony would probably still end up writing out reports for all of the examples that Stewart had given. Insubordination was especially dangerous when following an order could be the difference between making it out alive or ending up on Ducky’s slab.

Tony’s thoughts stuttered to a halt as the memory of Kate’s body lying on one of the Autopsy tables filled his mind. She wasn’t dead because of any kind of insubordination or failure to follow regulations, she was just dead. (Though, he couldn’t help but think that she might still have been alive if she had taken the shot when she’d had Ari in her sights in Autopsy.)

Stepping into the bullpen, Tony automatically turned towards where the First Major Crimes Response Team worked from, before stopping when he saw another agent sitting behind his desk. He hadn’t give much thought as to who would have taken over his position but Andrew Marshall was the perfect choice. He’d spent more time in the marines than Gibbs, had achieved a higher rank in the marines than Gibbs, and he was just as much of a hard ass as Gibbs. There was no way Marshall would put up with Gibbs’ crap. Though, Tony couldn’t help but feel sorry for McGee.

Turning away from his old team’s workspace, Tony saw that his new team was watching him. Which was a bit embarrassing really. He wished they hadn’t seen him staring at his old desk like some kind of lost dog.

Tony made his way towards them. The Second MCRT worked from one of the corners of the room which, in Tony’s opinion, was infinitely better than working in the centre of the room. The four desks were arranged similarly from what Tony was used to but, from what he could see, he and Asher would be working beside each other. He wondered if he could change that. He wondered if
he should.

“Morning, Tony.” Asher greeted, standing up and reaching out a hand to shake Tony’s.

“So it is.” Tony joked, squeezing Asher’s hand. “And it’s a good one too.” He turned to the other two agents who were standing behind their desks. “Agent Francis, Agent Wardle, good to see you again.”

“You too, Agent Dinozzo.” Francis stepped out from behind his desk and shook Tony’s hand.

Tony tried not to feel dwarfed by the four inches and several stone that Francis had on him. He wished he could at least reassure himself that Francis would be a good man to have in a fight but apparently, despite having been a pro football player and six foot five, Agent Francis was like a teddy bear. A really big teddy bear who would rather hug someone than punch them.

Turning to Agent Wardle, Tony noticed that her posture was just as military as it had been the first time they had met. Which was understandable given that she had spent nine years in the navy before joining NCIS.

“Thank you, sir.” Wardle smiled stiffly. “It is good to see you again too.”

Tony was relieved that she hadn’t saluted him, but it was obvious that she was still getting used to the idea of using conjugations in conversations with her superiors. He looked them all over for a second, trying to decide what to do, before coming to a decision.

“Alright, girl and boys, let’s go out for coffee. I’m buying.”

Francis and Wardle’s surprised expressions were comical, but they quickly followed Asher’s lead in collecting their overcoats, badges and guns. Tony led them through the bullpen and tried to ignore the prickling feeling that someone was watching them. In all honesty, if things had gone differently, and he’d still been sitting at his old desk, he would have been staring too.

Nobody spoke as they rode the elevator down to the ground floor and then walked out of the NCIS building into the Navy Yard. It was awkward and Tony was starting to regret choosing coffee as an icebreaker, but there was no going back now.

Swallowing to try and moisten his dry mouth, Tony cleared his throat. “In the spirit of giving you time to prepare, you should know that after we’ve gotten our coffee, we’re going to sit around a table and introduce ourselves. How would you describe yourself? What would you say are the most important parts of your life? What do we, your team, need to know about you? Now is the time to decide what you’re going to say.”

There was a line at the coffee cart, so Tony took his new team’s coffee orders and sent them off to find a table for them to sit at. Hopefully Asher would be able to reassure the other two that Tony wasn’t planning on eating them.

“Alright,” Tony started as he eventually joined them. “ Coffees for me, Asher, and Wardle, and a cup of tea for Agent Francis. Seriously, man?”

Francis pulled the cup towards him, inhaling the steam with a happy smile on his face. “Too much caffeine is bad for you.”

“Francis got used to eating healthily when he was playing ball.” Asher explained, as Tony sat down next to him.
“Good for you.” Tony told Francis. “Maybe watching you will inspire me to eat better.”

“That’s what happened to me.” Asher admitted. “Barb’s thrilled.”

Tony grinned. “I can imagine. Right, it’s pretty chilly out here so we should probably get started. I for one, did not dress to spend a lot of time outdoors. How about I start? I’m Tony Dinozzo. You can call me ‘Tony’, ‘Agent Dinozzo’, ‘sir’, or any combination of the three. Whatever makes you comfortable. I graduated high school from Rhodes Military Academy, got a double major in Phys. Ed. and Criminology from Ohio State. Since then I have also gotten my Masters in Criminology. I was on track to play pro-basketball after college, but then I blew out my knee in a game of football and so went to the Police Academy instead.

“I worked as a police officer in Peoria, Philadelphia and Baltimore before joining NCIS. I specialise in good old police investigative work and undercover work. I’m probably not as serious a Team Lead as you’re used to, but I do take the important things seriously - especially your safety and our conviction rate. We’re here to make the world a safer place, and that means not just catching the bad guy but doing it in a way that means that we can lock them away.”

Pausing, Tony looked around the table, taking special note of Francis and Wardle’s reactions. “Alright. Who’s next?”

There was a long pause, before Francis leaned forward. “Well, I’m Tony Francis, which is probably going to get a bit confusing, so you can all just call me Francis if you want. I got into college on a football scholarship, graduated with a major in Education, and then went on to play for the Redskins for a few seasons before deciding that I wanted to do something more. I joined NCIS about two years ago. I guess I specialise in talking to people and, uh, intimidating people.”

“And he’s pretty damn good at chasing after them too.” Asher added, with a grin in Francis’ direction.

“Yeah,” Francis chuckled. “That’s true. I think that’s all I’ve got to say.”

“Thanks, Francis.” Tony told him sincerely. “Has Asher here ever told how much of a Redskins fan he is?”

“Once or twice.” Francis admitted, with a twinkle in his eyes. “I may have signed a few autographs for him too.”

“Tony’s girlfriend is a big fan too.” Asher said with a grin. “You should sign something for her too.”

“You have a girlfriend, sir?” Francis asked with interest.

“We’ve only been dating for a few months.” Tony cautioned, elbowing Asher’s side. He’d left that out of his bio for a reason. “Her name is JJ and she’s a FBI Agent. Agent Wardle, do you want to go next? Or should Asher go?”

Wardle had already been sitting with better posture than anyone else at the table, but she straightened at Tony’s words as though her spine was made of steel. “I can go, sir. My name is Amelia Wardle, and I was a lieutenant in in the United States Navy until I resigned my commission six months ago to spend more time with my husband. I am married to Jonathan. We met in college, while I was in ROTC, and I graduated with a major in computer forensics. I specialise in technology, and I believe that my knowledge of the navy is sometimes useful for cases.”

“Definitely.” Asher confirmed with a smile, when it became clear that Wardle was finished. “Well, I’m Asher Balboa. I’m married to Barb, and we’re expecting our first child in July.”
“Wow!” Francis’ face lit up. “Congratulations, man!”

“Thanks.” Asher was beaming proudly. “My undergraduate and my postgraduate study are both in Psychology. I specialise in interrogations, I can do some undercover work - though definitely not on Tony’s level -, and theoretically I’m supposed to pretty good at profiling. And I guess, that’s me.”

“Well, I think it’s safe to say that every subsequent person was shorter than the one before them.” Tony commented, shaking his head at Asher’s brevity. “You lot make me look chatty. Which, admittedly, is not an unfair characterisation. Thank you for sharing, everyone. I’m sure we’ll get to know each other better as time goes on but, for now, let’s all go inside before our extremities start falling off.”

“Oh, thank god!” Asher stood up quickly, his hands already in his pockets.

“Don’t worry, Asher.” Tony grinned. “You’ll have plenty of opportunities to warm up when we get back to NCIS. We’re going to spend the rest of the morning in the gym so I can see how accurate all your fitness evals were.”

Asher’s groan was echoed in Francis and Wardle’s expressions, and Tony couldn’t help but be glad that he was the one in charge for once. He thought he could get used to being the one putting other people through their paces.
JJ leaned back in her seat on the plane and closed her eyes, wincing when her thoughts were immediately swarmed by images of the victims from their last case. Any murder was terrible, but the murder of a minor always seemed so much worse. Jimmy’s victims would never have a chance to go to college, to fall in love, or to have children. Their parents would never get to see them graduate, or watch their children succeed at life. All because a teenager hadn’t liked the popular kids at his school.

“Are you alright, JJ?” Spencer asked quietly, from the seat across from her.

“Yes,” JJ opened her eyes, and forced a smile. “I’m just a bit tired.”

The skin between Spencer’s eyes crinkled as he considered that. “Are you certain?”

JJ narrowed her eyes at him. Was he profiling her? Or had he just noticed that she was looking a bit restless? Was their a difference between observing and profiling? It was hard to tell where the line was sometimes.

“I don’t like cases that involve kids.” She admitted eventually. “And the idea of a teenager killing other teenagers just seems perverse.”

“William Golding wrote a fascinating character study of adolescent behaviour in his novel, ‘The Lord of the Flies’.”

“I haven’t read it.” JJ admitted.

Spencer didn’t look surprised. “The novel discusses what would happen if a group of schoolboys were left completely unsupervised for an extended period of time. Essentially, the popular boys take charge and end up murdering those they deem unnecessary.”

JJ swallowed, feeling suddenly ill. “That’s horrible. Is that why you think Jimmy killed them? Because he viewed them as being necessary?”

“Study of human development has shown that empathy does not stabilise in human beings until they are approximately twenty five years of age.” Reid answered, though it wasn’t really an answer. “Up until then, an adolescent’s empathy flashes in and out. In ‘Lord of the Flies’ Roger kills Piggy in a split second decision. Presumably because, in that moment, his empathy was completely absent.”

“But most kids don’t kill people when their empathy flashes out.”

“Most adolescents are influenced by regular adult supervision.”

JJ eyed Spencer curiously. “So you think Jimmy killed those teenagers because he didn’t have enough adult supervision? Lots of teenagers have single parents.”

“Jimmy has antisocial personality disorder, which has resulted in a total lack of empathy.” Spencer answered. “He killed his classmates both because he deemed them to be irritants, and because he wanted the opportunity to study forensics from a different perspective.”

“Irritants?” JJ repeated. “You make it sound as though they were a skin product that he reacted to.”

Spencer’s jaw tightened. “School yard bullies do a lot more harm than skin products.”
“Yeah,” JJ sighed. “I was lucky in school.”

Spencer turned towards the window. “I wasn’t.”

JJ bit her lip as she considered how her classmates would have responded to having someone like Spencer in their classes with them. She couldn’t imagine it having gone down well. No one ever liked to be shown up by someone years younger than they were. Not to mention that, given how different Spencer was now, he must have been a pretty weird kid.

“Enough of this maudlin talk.” Morgan announced, dropping suddenly into the chair beside Spencer. “We’re supposed to use the plane ride to de-stress from the case, not to dwell on it.”

JJ rolled her eyes, though she had to admit that she did feel grateful for Morgan’s interruption. She’d had no idea what to say next. What could a person possible say? I’m sorry you got so terribly bullied, thanks for not killing people like our unsub?

“Maudlin? What have you been doing, reading the dictionary?” She asked Morgan teasingly.

“I read.” Morgan protested. “Not the dictionary, I’ll admit, but I do read.”

“Have you read ‘Lord of the Flies’?” JJ asked curiously.

Morgan grimaced. “Once, and I’ve been trying to forget it ever since. But Reid is right, it’s a fascinating character study.”

“I’ve read it a few times.” Elle put in from across the aisle, her book was lying across her legs. “My only complaint about it is the lack of girls.”

“The presence of girls would have completely changed the social dynamics.” Spencer said, not looking away from the window.

“Exactly.” Elle said, as though she’d made some of point. “The character study was incomplete without considering what the presence of girls would do to the boys’ behaviour. It’s not as though men are ever so completely removed from women.”

“Adding girls would have made it a whole different story.” Morgan pointed out. “A R-rated story. It’s one thing to read about boys killing other boys, but nobody wants to read about boys raping girls.”

“I’m not saying I want to,” Elle defended quickly. “Just that I think it would have been really interesting. As it is, in my opinion, everyone should have to read it in highschool.”

“I hope you’re not going to suggest that I read it.” JJ shuddered at the thought.

“No,” Morgan answered firmly. “In fact, I would recommend that you avoid reading it. Focus on better things, brighter things. Speaking of better things, how’s Tony?”


Morgan ignored her. “Has he started back at NCIS yet?”

“Two days ago,” JJ answered. “I talked to him this last night and he said that he’s spent the time putting his new team through their paces. They should get their first case today.”

“Checking in, were you?” Morgan asked, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. “It must be getting serious.”
JJ shrugged one of her shoulders and she tried to swallow down her smile. “It is, and it isn’t. Technically we’ll have been seeing each other for three months tomorrow, but he spent seven weeks of that on the Reagan, so it doesn’t really count.”

Morgan let out a low whistle. “Three months? Wow, that’s gone fast.”

“Yes, and no.” JJ smiled wryly. “The time Tony was away went by really slowly.”

“Wait,” Elle started. “So if you’ve only been dating for three months, and he got back during the case with Rosso, that means you were only dating for a few weeks before he left.”

“Three and a half weeks.” JJ specified.

“The way you talk about this guy I thought you must have known him for months before he left.”

JJ stiffened defensively at the judgment she heard in Elle’s tone. “Nope, but when he left we both agreed to wait for each other.”

“After three weeks?” Elle raised her eyebrows. “Isn’t he kind of…old? He’s got to be older than Hotch, right?”

“By a few years.” JJ admitted. “But it’s not as though that matters at our age.”

“So he’s, what? Nine years older than you?”

“Ten.” JJ answered shortly.

“At least he’s not as old as Gideon.” Morgan commented, in a smirk.

“Gideon’s not that old.” Elle defended quickly.

JJ was hard pressed not to roll her eyes. Elle was such a teacher’s pet. “Exactly, and Tony’s more than ten years younger than him.”

“The plane’s descending.” Spencer commented suddenly, his attention still out of the window.

“Excellent.” Morgan’s face lit up. “I have a date tonight.”

Elle snorted. “You always have a date.”

JJ swallowed down a smile, hoping that Morgan was too distracted by Elle to notice it. She had a date too. Well, at least, she did so long as Tony’s team wasn’t bogged down by their first case.

19-19-19

Tony thought it ought to be a rule that a new team’s first case should be nice and easy. An open and shut case, where everything fell into place. A trial run, sort of thing, which left everyone feeling as though they had achieved something. Unfortunately, the murder of Lieutenant Abigail Wilkins did not fit that category.

At first glance, the case had seemed to be a convenience store robbery that had gone wrong. There were the terrified witnesses who had been held at gunpoint, the panicked store owner who had
emptied his till for the robbers, and the easy explanation that Lieutenant Wilkins was dead because she had tried to intervene.

Easy, cut and dry - except for the fact that there was nothing to suggest who exactly the robbers had been. But then Francis had done a thorough sweep of the area and had found the stolen money in a dumpster in an alley less than a block away, and suddenly the case hadn’t been quite so simple anymore.

Tony stared at his team who were all sitting behind their computers waiting for some kind of instructions. This was the scary bit. Putting his team through their paces had been easy. This was the part where he, and everyone else, discovered whether or not he was actually capable of leading a team.

“All right, everyone bring their chairs into the middle.” He decided, gesturing them forward with his hands. “We’re going to have a ‘campfire discussion’.”

There was a moment of stillness, as they all stared at him with surprised expressions, before Asher stood up and pulled his chair out from behind his desk. Francis and Wardle both scrambled to follow him.

Tony pulled out his own chair and sat down, gesturing the others forward so they were all in a circle. “Alright,” He said again. “‘Campfire discussions’ are brainstorming sessions. Let’s talk about what we know.”

“Lieutenant Wilkins is dead.” Asher started, a grin on his face.

“Yes,” Tony agreed. “Yes, she is. What else?”

“Someone wanted her murder to look like a convenience store robbery.” Francis put in.

“Possibly,” Tony cautioned. “But we shouldn’t rule out the other option until we have more reason to.”

Wardle opened her mouth with a frown, before closing it again.

“Wardle?” Tony prompted. “Do you have a comment? A query? A question?”

Wardle stiffened in her chair. “I was just wondering why Francis finding the money in the garbage wasn’t reason enough, sir.”

“Imagine that you’re a convenience store robber.” Tony instructed her, glancing towards Francis and Asher to indicate that he wanted them to take part in the exercise too. “After robbing your first store, you were terrified that the police were going to track you down, but then nothing happened. So you’ve robbed a few more, and you’re starting to feel as though you’re hitting your stride. Then in the middle of a robbery a woman in a navy uniform confronts you. You don’t know what to do. Navy personnel carry guns, right? What if she shoots you? What if the navy has taught her how to be super observant and she’s noticed things about you that will help the police catch you?

“You point your gun at her, trying to decide what to do, but then she moves her hand towards her waist and you decide you can’t risk it. You pull the trigger and watch as the bullet hits her in the chest. Except, people survive one gunshot, don’t they? So you shoot her a few more times just to be sure. It’s a shock to see her blood pooling on the floor. You’ve never killed anyone before. You know you can’t focus on it though. You have to get the money and get out. So you point your gun at the owner and demand your money.”
“Once he’s handed you a bag of money, you quickly run out of the store, over the dead body, and down the street. You can feel people staring at you. They must have heard the gunshots, which means that the police are probably already on their way. You run faster, scared that the police will catch you at any minute. Then it suddenly hits you that you’ve killed someone! You’re a murderer. The police will probably work way harder to catch you now. They’ll get all their dogs out, and use their computer experts, and then the next thing you know they’ll be knocking at your door looking for you.”

Tony glanced at his team’s expressions and was glad that they seemed to be following the story. “You start panicking. What can you do to not get caught? You think about all the crime shows you’ve watched and remember that sometimes the police manage to track the serial numbers on money. So you…”

“Throw it away.” Francis finished Tony’s sentence. “But we can’t track the serial numbers, can we?”

“No,” Tony admitted. “That’s only relevant when all the money has sequential serial numbers, but our bad guy doesn’t necessarily know that.”

“I should check the dumpster again.” Francis said. “I think if I’d been that guy I would have thrown away my shoes too. Just in case I’d left some kind of footprint.”

Tony blinked at him in surprise. He’d presumed Francis had already bagged and tagged it all. “Good idea.” He said, inwardly kicking himself for not confirming that Francis knew to process the entire dumpster. “How about you take Wardle with you? The bagging and tagging experience will be good for her.”

Wardle grimaced. “Yes, sir.”

“Alright, what else do we know? What do we need to know? What should we do?”

“We should check in with the local police to see if they’ve had any similar robberies.” Asher commented, reaching behind him to pull pen and paper off the desk. “And we should compare the witnesses’ statements - see what stands out.”

“Good,” Tony agreed.

“Should we look into Lieutenant Wilkins too?” Wardle asked cautiously.

“Definitely.” Tony confirmed. “That’s theory number two. We should explore both theories as much as we can until we get either a breakthrough or a dead end. I’ll also need to discuss the autopsy and forensic results with Abby and Ducky when they’re both done.”

“Gibbs’ team got a new case just as we got back,” Asher commented, glancing over towards where the first MCRT worked from. “So there will probably be a bit of a delay.”

Tony looked at him in surprise. “Really? Shouldn’t it be first come, first served?”

“More like, First Major Crime Response Team, first served.” Asher answered, with a shrug. “You get used to it.”

Tony wasn’t so sure that he wanted to. “Right, well, let’s get started on what we can. Francis, Wardle, you head back to the dumpster and bag and tag everything.”

“Everything?” Francis’ eyes widened.
“Everything.” Tony confirmed. “And check the outside of the dumpster for anything interesting as well. Francis, you’re the senior agent. Look after Wardle - she’s just a probie. Your job is to teach her what you know.”

Francis nodded seriously, straightening in his chair. “Yes, sir.”

“Wardle, if you don’t get motion sick, I’d suggest using the driving time to read through our regulations for bagging and tagging on your way back to the crime scene. Better yet, read them aloud to Francis while he drives.” Tony told her with a smile. “Not because either of you are doing anything wrong, it’s just always good to keep reminding yourself of the basics when you’re learning.”

“Yes, sir.” Wardle answered crisply.

“But don’t make yourself motion sick.” Tony added quickly. Sometimes Wardle seemed a little too good at following orders. “Asher, you start looking into our victim. I want to know about both her personal and her private life. And I’ll contact the local precinct and ask them about any history of robberies in the area.”

“Can do.” Asher agreed with a nod. “Are you going to want to talk to her next of kin personally?”

Tony glanced at the clock. “Tomorrow. They’ll already have been informed of her death, but we should give them some time to process it. It’s currently 1400 hours, we’ve got three hours to do as much as we can and then we’ll start back at it in the morning.”

19-19-19

Leaving the office at 1715 hours felt more monumental than Tony thought it should.

It wasn’t as though Gibbs had never let him leave before 1730. There had been many a time, both during and between cases, where Gibbs had been reasonable about letting the team leave. In fact, glancing across to where the First MCRT was working, Tony could see that McGee and David were both packing up their things to go home.

Yet, despite all that, there still seemed to be something especially significant about leaving in time to meet JJ for dinner.

Maybe it was because the act of calling his team’s work to a halt and sending them home for the night had brought the reality of his position home for Tony. He was in charge. It was his team. And he could run the team however he wanted to. If he wanted to make a habit of utilising healthy work boundaries for his team, then he could. It was a heady thought and the exhilaration stayed with Tony as he drove to the restaurant he and JJ had chosen to meet at.
JJ was already seated when Tony arrived, and the sight of her had him breathing easier than he had since he’d last seen her. Which was ridiculous. It had only been a week since he’d last seen her, and he’d really only seen her twice in more than nine weeks if you took into account his time afloat. There was no way Tony should have missed her. But he had.

“You’re looking happy.” JJ observed, after Tony had greeted her with a brief kiss.

“Is is that obvious?” Tony asked, settling himself in the seat opposite her.

“It is when you’re wearing that smile.” JJ commented. “I take it your case is going well?”

“We’re making progress,” Tony shrugged a shoulder. “I’ll know more tomorrow.”

“So what’s got you so happy then?” JJ asked curiously, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

Tony poured them both a glass of water as he considered how to answer. He definitely wasn’t ready to admit the depths of his feelings to JJ, which really just left one option.

“I’m really enjoying being the Team Lead. We all left before 1730 hours today and, if I want to, I can make that happen every single day. I think the power might have gone to my head.”

JJ laughed lightly. “I doubt that. Is it unusual for NCIS teams to finish on time?”

“I think it depends on the team.” Tony answered, trying to remember what he’d noticed about the other teams in the bullpen. More often than not, Gibbs’ team had been the last one in the office. “Most of the crimes we investigate don’t run the risk of an extra body count if we take too long. That being said, when I was working with Gibbs I seemed to spend more evenings at work than I did at home.”

JJ’s nose wrinkled as she frowned. “That doesn’t sound very sustainable.”

“I managed it for close to four years.” Tony reminded her. “You get used to it.”

“But you’re not planning on running your new team like that?”
“Work boundaries are important. I don’t want to end up like Gibbs. Besides,” Tony reached across the table to touch her hand. “I have better things to do with my evenings.”

JJ’s eyes sparkled. “You do, huh? What kinds of things?”

“Well, I particularly enjoy taking beautiful women out for dinner.”

“Women?” JJ raised a teasing eyebrow.

“Woman.” Tony corrected himself quickly. “I enjoy taking a particular beautiful woman out for dinner.”

JJ’s smile was bright. “Well, that’s certainly something we have in common then, Agent Dinozzo?”

Tony grinned. “You have a beautiful woman that you enjoy taking out for dinner too, Agent Jareau?”

“I wonder what you would do if I said yes.”

“Well, I’d definitely have to up my game. There’d be flowers, chocolates, string quartets, and probably a singing leprechaun or two.”

“A singing leprechaun?”

“Alright, so maybe not the leprechaun.” Tony admitted with a grin. “But how would you feel about a holiday in Paris?”

JJ laughed. “You’re ridiculous.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is romantic.” Tony pointed out.
JJ’s expression sobered slightly. “You’d really do all that for me?”

Tony’s stomach twisted nervously, declarations of affections were so much easier when they were joking around. Nevertheless, he’d never been one to back down from a challenge. He met her gaze and offered her a gentle smile.

“JJ, I’d force myself to support the Redskins for you.”

Her delighted laughter was totally worth it.
“NCIS Forensic Lab, you’re speaking with Charles Stirling.”

“Hi, Charles, this is Agent Tony Dinozzo, from the Second MCRT.” Tony replied, blinking away his surprise at having someone other than Abby answer the phone. Besides, hadn’t Abby’s assistant’s name been Chip? “Do you have any results for us yet?”

“I don’t think so.” Charles answered, sounding unsure. “We’re a bit bogged down at the moment.”

Tony pinched his lips together. “It’s been twenty four hours. I had at least expected the fingerprint results to have come back by now. When do you expect to have them?”

“I’m not sure.” Charles admitted. “We’re currently process the evidence submitted by Agent Gibbs’ team, but I’m sure we’ll get onto your evidence next.”

“I see.” Tony clenched his hand into a fist in frustration. Gibbs’ team hadn’t been called out on their case until after Tony’s team had submitted most of their evidence. There was no legitimate reason for Abby to be processing Gibbs’ evidence first. She was either playing favourites or punishing Tony for leaving. Either way, it was unprofessional and definitely the sort of behaviour that Assistant Director Stewart had ordered him to write up.

“Agent Dinozzo?” Charles prompted. “Was there anything else you needed?”

“No, thank you, Charles.” Tony quickly up up the phone before he said something he regretted. Abby’s lack of professionalism wasn’t Charles’ fault. He was just as helpless as Tony had been whenever Gibbs decided that the rules didn’t apply to him.

“No luck, huh?” Asher asked sympathetically, from his desk a few feet away from Tony’s.

“No.” Tony confirmed flatly. “Charles expects that they will begin processing our evidence soon.”

Asher looked almost amused. “How does it feel to be on this side of the forensic favoritism?”

Tony glanced over to where Francis and Wardle were both working on their computers. They weren’t obviously listening, but he knew that they probably were. “I had no idea it was even a thing. Why doesn’t anyone do something about it?”

“It’s not that bad.” Asher shrugged. “It’s definitely not worth having to face the wrath of Gibbs’.”

“Nobody worries that it will affect our solve rate?” Tony asked. “Leads can disappear in a heartbeat - what if that happens while we’re sitting here waiting forty eight hours for Abby to get around to processing our evidence?”

“So it’s not ideal.” Asher admitted. “But what are you going to do about it?”
Tony turned his attention back to his computer without answering. As much as he hated to admit it, Asher was right. There was nothing Tony could do. Not unless he was willing to file a formal complaint against Abby - and that was something that he didn’t think he could do again. At least, not yet.

Focusing his attention on their victim’s financials that were displayed on his computer screen, Tony quickly skimmed through the information. There was nothing that really stood out. Lieutenant and Mr. Wilkins received wages from the US Navy and the Washington Daily News respectively. They spent a lot of money at coffee shops and gas stations, and seemed to enjoy going to see movies together. Perhaps the only point of interest, was the frequency that Lieutenant Wilkins shopped at the convenience store where she had died. According to her records, she had visited the store almost daily. Which was definitely a point in the ‘targeted murder’ column, but did bring about new questions. Like, why anyone would need to shop in a convenience store six days a week.

Tony glanced over at Asher, and then Francis and Wardle. All of them were focussed on their own computer screens. “Alright, people.” He called for their attention. “Campfire time.”

It didn’t take long for the four of them to gather their chairs in the area between the desks, and Tony made sure to take note of the his agents’ reactions. Francis seemed excited to be taking part in his second-ever campfire, Wardle looked worried, and Asher didn’t seem to mind either way.

“Okay,” Tony leaned forward in his chair. “Yesterday we knew that Lieutenant Wilkins was dead, and that the money in Francis found in the dumpster suggested that someone might have purposely targeted her. What have we learned since then?”

“Wilkins was career navy.” Asher started. “She attended the Naval Academy straight out of highschool, and then spent four years aboard the USS Antietam - a Ticonderoga class guided missile cruiser - until she was made a full lieutenant and transferred to the Navy Yard. That was about a year ago.”

“Anything stand out for you in that, Wardle?” Tony asked.

“No, sir.” Wardle answered stiffly. “It all sounds very standard. It is expected for a new officer to spend four years with the fleet, before being transferred to a land command when they are promoted to the rank of lieutenant.”

Tony nodded in understanding. “Anything else, Asher?”

“I spoke to her CO, Lieutenant Commander Phillips, over the phone. He described Wilkins as being competent with the technicalities of the job, but seemed to insinuate that she was less competent when it came to interacting with enlisted sailors.”

Tony opened his mouth to comment, before noticing that Wardle was frowning. “Wardle?”

“Sir?” Wardle looked uncomfortable.

“You look as though you have something to add.”

“Nothing that is not speculation, sir.”

“Even better.” Tony said, motioning for her to continue.

Wardle swallowed. “It is not uncommon for some enlisted sailors to resent having a female officer in their chain of command.”
Tony nodded encouragingly. “Which is a possible motive. How do other officers respond to those sorts of attitudes in your experience? Could Wilkin’s CO know what is happening and just be ignoring it?”

“Yes, sir.” Wardle answered.

“I think we need to speak to Lieutenant Commander Phillips in person.” Tony decided. “Asher, you’ve made first contact, so after this, go and take Wardle with you. See if you can find the enlisted sailors that Phillips mentioned while you’re there. Francis and I will visit the husband. But first, anyone have any more new information?”

“I think the dumpster was a bust, sir.” Francis admitted. “It was just filled with junk.”

“You sent it all to forensics though, right?” Tony checked.

“Yes, sir.” Francis nodded.

“Good job. Anything else?”

Wardle and Francis both shook their heads.

“Well, I can report that Wilkin’s murder is one of three convenience store robberies the local leos have been called to in the last few months but, having read the reports on the other two robberies, I don’t think our murder is related to the other two robberies. So either this was someone’s first try or Wilkins was targeted.”

“Or the guy got his experience in a different district.” Asher added.

“Right.” Tony agreed. “But, since Lieutenant Wilkins was an almost daily shopper at the convenience store in question, I think it’s looking more and more like the second option is the right one.”

The interview with their victim’s husband went about as well as any interview with a grieving spouse ever went. Which was to say, not very well at all. Tony’s experience had taught him that it was practically impossible to get the information they needed without upsetting or infuriating the grieving family so Mr. Wilkin’s grief driven accusation that they were trying to use their investigation to defame his wife’s career didn’t really bother him. Francis seemed rattled by it though.

“You alright, Francis?” Tony asked, as he drove them back towards NCIS. “You’re looking a bit pale there.”

Francis looked amused. “I’m looking pale, sir?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “What? You think that just because you’re black you can’t look pale? Fine. You look a bit shaken by Mr. Wilkin’s reaction.”

Francis swallowed, his smile disappearing. “I’d have thought he would want us investigating his wife’s murder.”

Tony sighed, trying to figure out how best to explain what he was thinking. “You watch many movies, Francis?”

Francis looked confused. “Some, why?”
“Give me the name of one you’re familiar with.”

“Uh, ‘The Matrix’.”

Tony nodded, he could work with that. “In the first movie, Cypher kills Dozer, Apoc, and Switch, right?”

“Yeah.”

“But the movie never shows us how the rest of the group deal with their deaths.” Tony pointed out. “It’s all action from there to the end of the movie, and then ‘The Matrix Reloaded’ picks up six months later. How do you think the team dealt with it in those missing months?”

“They would have been angry.” Francis answered thoughtfully. “It’d be devastating really. I mean, there were only seven of them to start with - eight if you include Neo - and suddenly three of them are dead.”

“Right,” Tony agreed. “And how do you think they would respond to anyone new who wanted to join their group?”

“Everyone else was stuck in the matrix.” Francis frowned.

“But if miraculously someone was able to…?” Tony asked.

“They’d be really suspicious, especially after Cypher was the one to kill them.”

“I imagine they did everything they could to make their security even better. Lock everything up behind ten foot walls.” Tony suggested, as he stopped at a set of traffic lights.

“Definitely.” Francis agreed.

“Mr. Wilkins is like that too.” Tony told him. “His wife has just been killed. He’s angry, devastated, suspicious, and he wants to build ten foot walls around every area of his life to keep himself safe. Except, there we are, complete strangers, asking him questions that would probably have made him uncomfortable last week when his wife was still alive.”

Francis seemed to consider that. “So people normally accuse you of trying destroy their wife’s reputation?”

“No, that one’s actually pretty uncommon.” Tony admitted, as the light turned green. “Which makes it useful.”

“How?”

“Because it tells us that he doesn’t trust the Navy.” Tony explained, executing a right hand turn. “Which is pretty unusual for a navy spouse, so chances are something has happened to make him feel that way.”

“Something like her being hassled by the enlisted men.” Francis commented, sounding pretty proud of himself.

“Could be.” Tony agreed noncommittally. “We won’t know until Asher and Wardle tell us what they’ve learnt.”

20-20-20
Striding into NCIS, a takeaway coffee in his hand and Francis in step with him, Tony experienced a strange feeling of realisation. He was in charge now. He was the one make the decisions and having junior agents scurry around after him - though, personally, he preferred his junior agents to be confident enough not to scurry.

It wasn’t a new realisation by any means. In fact, he was starting to feel a bit like a broken record as the realisation seemed to strike him anew every few hours. Still, as unoriginally as the realisation was, it still felt huge. Everything was dramatically different now - and mostly for the better.

Though the sight of McGee waiting for the elevator with Agent Marshall, Gibbs’ new SFA, was a stark reminder of the things that had changed for the worse. Most notably, the end his relationships with Gibbs, McGee and Abby. Though, as he resisted the urge to take the stairs to avoid McGee, Tony couldn’t help but wonder whether maybe that was a good thing too. When he thought about his last four years at NCIS the bad memories far outweighed the good ones. In fact, he thought that he had probably enjoyed the three days that he had spent with his new team more than any three days he could remember from his time on Gibbs’ team.

McGee didn’t seem to notice Tony and Francis’ approach, but Agent Marshall nodded in a friendly greeting. “Agent Dinozzo, good to see you again.”

“Likewise, Agent Marshall.” Tony agreed, shaking Marshall’s hand and ignoring the way McGee’s expression graduated from surprise to annoyance. “I’m surprised to see you here in DC. You looked pretty settled at Pendleton last year.”


“Yeah, seven weeks.” Tony nodded. “It was an experience.”

“So I heard.” Marshall looked amused. “I have a buddy stationed on the Reagan. He said you just about turned the whole ship upside down.”

Tony grinned self-deprecatingly. “Yeah, well…”

“He said it was long past due.” Marshall added, with a respectful tilt of the head.

“There were seventeen year olds on board.” Tony shook his head. “They should be at home breaking their parents’ curfew, not having their stomachs pumped in a USS sickbay.”

“Makes you feel old, doesn’t it?” Marshall offered, with a half grin.

Tony groaned dramatically. “Sure does.”

McGee, whose expression had been growing more and more frustrated, cleared his throat. “Tony.”

Not feeling very generous, Tony raised an eyebrow questioningly. “Yes?”

McGee looked flustered as he opened and closed his mouth a few times.

Tony turned back to Marshall. “Have you met Agent Francis, Marshall? He’s one of the junior agents on my team.”

Marshall turned his attention to Francis who practically squirmed under his gaze. “Good to meet you, Agent Francis.”
“You too, sir.” Francis smiled, shaking the hand that Marshall had offered him.

McGee let out a derisive snort as the elevator doors finally opened. “You don’t have to call everyone ‘sir’, Francis. No matter what Tony told you.”

Tony rolled his eyes as he followed the other three men onto the elevator. He could still remember McGee and David’s reaction to Asher jokingly calling him ‘sir’ when he’d announced his promotion. How had McGee not gotten over that yet?

Francis stiffened, his easy smile disappearing. “There’s nothing wrong with showing respect to senior agents.”

McGee’s eyes narrowed as he opened his mouth to reply, but he was cut off by Marshall.

“Shut up, Agent McGee.” Marshall ordered sharply. “Agent Francis is right.”

McGee’s mouth clicked shut obediently, even as his expression darkened.

Tony watched the byplay in amazement. McGee would never have shut up for him. He would have ranted and complained all the up to the bullpen, before getting Gibbs to take it out of Tony’s ass. Clearly Marshall was a better SFA for the team than Tony had ever been. Maybe Marshall’s influence would be able to temper the bad habits Gibbs had been teaching McGee. Though, given the dirty glare McGee was giving Marshall, Tony doubted that.

“How’s your case coming, Dinozzo?” Marshall asked, as though nothing had happened.

“We’re making progress.” Tony shrugged. “It’s hard to do too much without any kind of forensic results, but then maybe I’m just spoiled. When I was on the force we’d sometimes wait weeks for our forensics to come back.”

“You were a detective?” Marshall asked curiously.

“Sure was.” Tony grinned. “That’s how I meet Gibbs. I busted him buying some drugs, chased him down the road, and tackled him. Then I arrested him.”

Marshall’s expression was almost gleeful. “How have I never heard that story before? It ought to be in the NCIS ‘Hall of Fame’!”

Tony laughed at the thought. “Yeah, it was definitely a good day.”

“So you tackled and arrested Gibbs, and then he hired you?” Francis asked, sounding almost disbelieving. “I would of thought he’d have gotten you fired.”

“After I arrested Gibbs, I found out my partner was dirty.” Tony explained, ignoring the stab of pain that still came whenever he thought about Danny’s betrayal. “I confronted him and then turned him in. That was when Gibbs recruited me.”

“That sounds like hell.” Marshall commented with feeling. “There’s nothing worse than finding out that the guy whose supposed to have your back doesn’t give a crap.”

Tony nodded in silent agreement. He’d been relieved to start working for Gibbs who he’d been sure would never take a bribe. Of course, Gibbs had just taught him that there were more ways than one of leaving your partner out in the cold. It was a relief to be working with Asher, who he knew would
always have his back, and Francis and Wardle, who he was sure would at least try.

Glancing towards Marshall, Tony wondered how the agent was dealing with being part of Gibbs team? Was it as bad for him, as it had been for Tony? Sure, the man had somehow figured out how to get McGee to do as he was told, but how much crap was he getting from Gibbs? Tony couldn’t help but wonder whether Gibbs had been who Marshall had been thinking about when he’d mentioned people who didn’t give a crap. That had definitely been how Tony had felt in his position.

Tony’s thoughts were cut off by the ding that signaled that the elevator had reached its destination. As the elevator doors began to open, he made a split decision.

“Hey, Marshall, do you play any basketball?”

Marshall looked surprised. “Not very well, and not since I left the marines. Why?”

“Asher Balboa and I sometimes play some one-on-one on a Saturday.” Tony explained. “You should come next time we have a game.”


“Sure,” Tony agreed, ignoring McGee’s glare. “We normally have dinner together afterwards, with Asher’s wife and my girlfriend, you and your wife would be welcome to join us.” Which, admitted, was pushing the truth a bit, since JJ had only had dinner with the Balboa’s once and it hadn’t been after a game of basketball, but that was hardly important.

Marshall nodded gratefully. “I’m sure Margie would like that.”

“Sweet.” Tony grinned, exiting the elevator as the doors tried to close on them. “I’ll let you know when and where.”

McGee was the first to follow him out. “You and Asher play basketball, Tony? How come you never invited me? I was your teammate!”

Tony had to swallow down his amusement as he suddenly imagined a red and out of breath McGee trying to play basketball with him and Asher. “Have you ever played basketball before, McGee?”

“No,” McGee admitted, with obvious reluctance. “But if you’d invited me, I could have learned how.”

Tony sighed, turning to give McGee his full attention. “Asher and I play ball because we’re friends McGee. You and I aren’t friends. We were just teammates.”

McGee’s face reddened. “Oh, and I suppose Kate wasn’t your friend either!”

Tony stomach twisted painfully at the memory of Kate. “No, she wasn’t.”

McGee expression darkened. “Abby was right! You think you’re too good to be our friend now that you’re a Team Leader. She told me about how you filed a complaint against her. I can’t believe you’d do that!”

Tony really wished McGee hadn’t chosen to have this conversation in the bullpen. He just knew that the whole room was listening in. Francis and Marshall certainly were. Tony just hoped Marshall would be able to prevent Francis from trying to step in. The last thing this argument needed was a third party.
“I wasn’t the one who decided not to be your and Abby’s friend, McGee.” Tony told the younger agent. “You both made that decision for me. And I filed a complaint against Abby because she was refusing to process evidence relating to a case I investigated while I was afloat. I didn’t have any other option. She was refusing to even take my phone calls.”

McGee did not look impressed. “It was a case about comic books. She wouldn’t have done it if something actually bad had happened.”

Tony shook his head tiredly, there was no way he was going to bother trying to explain to McGee how bad an effect a few stolen comic books could have on a ship’s crew. “It’s not Abby’s job to decide when a crime is worth solving or not, McGee.”

“She wouldn’t have done it if you hadn’t run off and abandoned us!”

“I didn’t abandon you!” Tony exclaimed, tightening his jaw in frustration. “Put yourself in my place for a moment. If you got a promotion, would you turn it down to stay with the team?”

McGee crossed his arms stubbornly. “You didn’t get a promotion, Tony. You used to be in the best team, and now you’re in the second best team. If anything it’s a demotion.”

“Agent McGee!” Marshall’s voice cut through the room. “I don’t know whether you’re really as stupid as you sound, but now would be a really good time to shut up and get back to your desk before someone in this room decides to write you up for insubordination.”

McGee sneered. “You’re not Gibbs! You don’t get to tell me what to do!”

The corner of Marshall’s mouth curved up in a sardonic smile. “Tell me, Agent McGee, did you even read the NCIS Orders and Regulations, or did you just figure that you knew enough to skip it?”

“Of course I read them!” McGee defended, looking unimpressed.

“Really? What does Section 17 cover then?”

“I didn’t memorize them!”

“Maybe you should have.” Marshall told him. “Then you might not have found yourself in this situation.”

“What situation?” McGee asked belligerency.

“Is there a problem here, Tony, Agent Marshall?” Assistant Director Stewart stepped into Tony’s vision from the direction of the stairwell.

McGee blanched and took a step back.

“Yes, sir.” Marshall answered straightly. “Agent McGee seems to be of the opinion that he isn’t required to follow any one’s orders except Agent Gibbs.”

“I see.” Stewart eyed McGee with a frown. “Agent Dinozzo?”

Tony swallowed, remembering the order Stewart had given him about reporting other agents for breaking regulations. Still, enough dirty laundry had been aired in the bullpen today. “Agent McGee also seems to be struggling with my departure from the first Major Crimes Response Team, sir.”

Stewart sighed. “Thank you, Tony, Agent Marshall. I expect full reports on the incident on my desk by the end of the day. Kara, Steven, I want reports from you too.” He ordered, naming the two other
Team Leads who were in the room. “Agent McGee, I think we need to have conversation. I’ll expect you in my office in fifteen minutes.”

McGee was starting to look worried. “I want Gibbs to present.”

Stewart’s jaw tightened. “Ah, yes, Gibbs, where is he?”

“He’s following up a lead.” McGee answered quickly. “I don’t know when he’ll be back.”

“Then I expect to see the two of you in my office by the end of the day.” Stewart capitulated, sounding unimpressed. He glanced around the bullpen again. “Don’t any of you have work to do?”
Chapter 21

Tony stared at his computer screen as he tried to find the words to best describe his and McGee’s altercation for the report Stewart had ordered. He felt like such an idiot. He’d only been a Team Leader for four days and he’d already screwed up. What had he been thinking letting McGee confront him in the bullpen? He should have realised that McGee was gearing up to something like that and so arranged to meet McGee somewhere private to let the younger man have his say without it turning into the sort of incident people had to write reports about.

More than that, he should have been the kind of Senior Field Agent who trained their junior agents better. The responsibility for McGee’s bad behaviour didn’t just fall on McGee, it fell on the agents who had trained him. That was to say Tony and Gibbs.

Which was fine for Gibbs who had had friends in high places and the highest solve rate in the agency, but Tony couldn’t imagine that he was going to get out of this mess without some kind of punishment. Probably a demotion. He’d be the laughing stock of the agency - the only agent in NCIS history to have lasted less than a week as a Team Lead before being demoted.

Tony was still wrestling with his report when the noise in the bullpen suddenly hushed and he looked up to see Gibbs exiting the elevator with David at his side. It was a bit disconcerting to realise that every agent in the bullpen had stopped working to watch the show. Some of them were even standing up to get a better view. Had they done that while Tony was part of Gibbs’ team? Probably, which begged the question: how had Tony not realised that he and his former team had been the bullpen’s ongoing sideshow?

It was tempting to join the agents standing up when Gibbs reached the area that the first MCRT worked from, but Tony didn’t need to see to know what was happening. Gibbs would stride to his desk and put his gun and badge in his drawer. Then he’d bark out a few orders, or demand an update from McGee and Marshall. McGee would then stand up with an expression that somehow managed to be both shamefaced and offended and stutter out some kind of confession about what had happened. Gibbs would hear him out until McGee got to the bit about Stewart expecting to see them, before storming up the stairs to demand that Director Shepard get involved.

The only wild card was Marshall, but Tony didn’t think his replacement would change the equation much. Gibbs was a force of nature who didn’t let anyone, let alone his SFA, influence his actions. Which that any minute now, Gibbs…

“HE WHAT?!!” Gibbs’ yell broke through Tony’s thoughts, before the man himself suddenly returned to Tony’s field of vision - heading for the stairs.

Tony watched him climb the stairs with both pride - that he’d been able to predict Gibbs’ reaction to accurately - and trepidation. He couldn’t imagine this going well for him.

Turning back to computer screen, Tony tried to focus his attention back on the report he was supposed to be writing:

‘Agent McGee does not appear to understand the difference between workplace relationships and friendship.’

Tony reread the sentence, before backspacing it. Reports were supposed to be about the facts, not
speculation.

‘Agent McGee appeared to feel excluded by my friendly overtures to Agent Marshall.’

Tony sighed, before backspacing that as well. He really had no idea what Stewart wanted him to write.

21-21-21

Tony had only just emailed his report to Stewart when Asher and Wardle returned to the bullpen.

“You alright, Tony?” Asher asked, placing his gun and badge in a drawer.

“How about you?” Tony asked, raising an eyebrow in surprise. How had Asher heard… “Francis, something to share?”

Asher grinned. “Don’t blame him. It was Steven Cramer.”

Tony shook his head, unwillingly amused. “Has Gibbs’ team always been such fodder for gossip and entertainment?”

“It’s like our own little sitcom.” Asher replied unapologetically. “It’s got the guy everyone likes, the guy everyone hates, the annoying guy, and the hot girl.”

Tony didn’t even want to try and guess who was who. At least, not right now. He was sure he’d spent a few hours obsessing over it later though.

“So you’re alright?” Asher asked again.

“I’m fine.” Tony answered, mostly truthfully. “What did you learn?”

Asher’s eyes gleamed. “Campfire time?”

“Good idea.” Tony agreed, trying not to think about the fact that this could be the team’s last campfire. He wondered how long it would take for him to be called into Stewart’s office. Hopefully, they’d at least get the chance to solve the case.

He pulled his chair out from behind his desk, and joined the other three members of his team in the middle. “So?”

“Wardle?” Asher prompted.

“Lieutenant Wilkins was not well liked by the enlisted sailors nor by her commanding officer.” Wardle told them.

“Even the two women in her command didn’t seem to like her.” Asher added. “So it can’t have been entirely about her gender.”

Wardle leaned forward slightly. “Lieutenant Commander Phillips allowed me to look through the incident reports and complaints involving Wilkins in the last twelve months. From what I read, I believe Wilkins was the sort of officer to complain about gender inequality at every instance.”

“Basically, she was their Tina Larsen.” Asher commented.

Tony grimaced at the thought. “Wonderful.”
“What’s wrong with Tina Larsen?” Francis asked, glancing over to where Larsen worked with the fourth MCRT.

Tony glared at Asher. How was he supposed to answer that question without sounding like the ‘sex fiend’ Larsen had accused him of being.

“Tony held a door open for her once and she accused him of sexual harassment.” Asher answered simply.

Francis glanced over towards Larsen again, this time looking worried. “Really?”

“I also flirted with her.” Tony admitted quickly, not wanting Larsen’s name to be dragged through the mud for the lack of a few details. “Anyway, so Wilkins filed a lot of complaints?”

“Not just complaints. Some of the reprimands she filed against the men in her command will hold back their careers for years.”

Tony straightened in his seat. That was the best lead that they’d all case. “Anyone in particular?”

“Petty Officer Pascoe and Seaman Santos.”

“I’m about to ask a very unpolitically correct question,” Tony warned them, as the thought came to him. “But was there any sign that Lieutenant Wilkins was exaggerating some of her reports of inappropriate behavior?”

Wardle’s expression tightened. “Exaggerated, sir?”

“I know it’s an offensive question, Wardle.” Tony offered gently. “But we need to know if she ever cried wolf.”

“I…” Wardle paused. “I don’t know, sir.”

“I’m not accusing her of anything.” Tony told his team. “And I certainly wouldn’t say anything to suggest it out of this circle, not without proof. But if Wilkins was making up reports, or blowing things out of proportion, we need to know.”

“I’ll contact Phillips and let him know that we need to look at those files again.” Asher offered. “Wardle and I can go over them together.”

“Good.” Tony nodded. “Francis, you find out everything there is to know about Petty Officer Pascoe. I’ll take Seaman Santos.”

JJ was almost relieved to find the coffeepot in the break room empty. She’d spend the two hours since lunch slogging through file after file of nasty, horrible crimes to assign them to different agents and she really needed a break. An empty coffee-pot meant that she could spend a few extra minutes making herself coffee without feeling guilty. (Though, she didn’t understand what the other agents found so complex about refilling the coffeepot after they’d emptied it).

“Hey, JJ, I thought I saw you down here.” Morgan appeared at the break room door. “I just wanted to give you a heads up that I’ve just passed the Kansas City case on to Elle. I made a few notes for the LEOs, but I think she’ll have some good points to add.”

“Okay,” JJ offered a half smile. “Thanks for letting me know.”
Morgan turned to go, before pausing. “You okay?”

“Yeah, of course.” JJ frowned. “Do I not look okay?”

Morgan chuckled. “Talk about a dangerous question. Are you trying to get me into trouble here?”

“I’m fine, Morgan.” JJ assured him. “My head’s just a bit caught up in some of the case files I’ve reading.”

“Nasty stuff, huh?”

“Yeah.” JJ barely managed to withhold a shudder as a few of the photos that had been attached to the files popped back into her mind. “I’d say I think I’m ready for a holiday, but I’ve only been back from my last one for a week.”

Morgan moved into the break room and leaned against the door frame. “I hear holidays aren’t all they’re cracked up to be. Just think of Gideon, he still hasn’t recovered from the holiday he took.”

JJ shook her head. “I still can’t believe he went skydiving. What was he thinking?”

Morgan grinned. “He’s not that old, you know.”

“He’s in his fifties!” JJ reminded him. “He’s only four years younger than my dad.”

“I think that just makes you young.” Morgan laughed.

“You’re only five years older than me.” JJ reminded him. “Gideon’s twenty years older than you.”

“Yeah, well, your boyfriend is ten years older than you.” Morgan retorted. “How’s his new team handling their first case?”

JJ blinked at the sudden change of subject. “Pretty well, I think. They’re working a murder case at the moment. A female lieutenant was shot in an isolated incident yesterday morning. It looks like a convenience store robbery, but Tony thinks it was a targeted hit.”

“Huh,” Morgan looked intrigued. “Does he have a possible motive yet?”

“I don’t know.” JJ admitted. “I haven’t spoken to him since last night. Do you ever wish that you worked for a normal unit? Where the crimes were isolated incidents?”

“I worked those kinds of cases when I was cop.” Derek reminded her. “They’re not so different, you know.”

“Less gruesome pictures, I’d imagine.”

“Sometimes.” Morgan acknowledged. “But the murders themselves were normally so pointless.”

“As opposed to the cases we consult on?”

Morgan seemed to be searching for the right words. “Most of our subs kill because there’s something in their history or chemical makeup that makes them see the world differently. That’s why they’re killing. Tony’s unsub will be someone like a angry spouse, a jealous friend, or a subordinate who didn’t like taking orders from a woman.”

JJ frowned. “Do you really think someone might have killed her because of her gender? Aren’t we past that?”
“You’d think so.” Morgan agreed. “And that’s why I wouldn’t want to go back to solving those sorts of cases. They’re just so petty. Do you read the ‘Washington Daily News’?”

“No, why?”

“They’ve published a series of anonymous tell-all articles commenting on the gender inequality in the navy over the last couple of weeks.” Morgan commented. “Tony might find it a useful read.”


“I read.” Morgan defended. “Apparently, I read more than you do!”

JJ rolled her eyes as she turned to pour herself a cup of hot coffee. “Just because I don’t read that particular paper.”

22-22-22

Tony couldn’t even pretend to be surprised when Stewart’s assistant called to summon him down to a meeting, but he couldn’t help but feel as though he was riding the elevator down to his execution. Or, more accurately, his demotion. It didn’t help his nerves that he and the team still hadn’t made any real progress on the case they were working on.

“Can I get you a coffee, Agent Dinozzo?” Juliet smiled, as Tony approached her desk.

Tony shook his head. “No, thank you, Juliet.”

“Alright,” Juliet nodded towards Stewart’s office. “You can go straight in.”

Tony’s stomach twisted nervously as he stepped into the office. “Sir?”

“Come in, sit down, and call me Paul, Tony.” Stewart ordered, frowning over his reading glasses. “And then you can tell what the hell you were thinking when you wrote this report.”

Tony frowned in confusion. “Is there something wrong with my report, s-Paul?”

Stewart turned to his computer screen. “You wrote that: ‘Agent McGee’s behaviour, while inappropriate, must be seen in the light of the lack of positive influences that he has encountered during his time with NCIS’.” He turned to peer. “Really, Tony? That is your assessment of this afternoon’s incident?”

Tony swallowed. “Agent McGee is a junior agent and, as such, responsibility for his behaviour falls on his Training Officer.”

“Some responsibility falls on his Training Officer, yes, but not all of it.” Stewart corrected. “Agent McGee is an adult, and therefore is perfectly capable of understanding appropriate workplace behaviour. As to the responsibility of his Training Officer - that responsibility falls on Agent Gibbs. Not you.”

“But I was McGee’s documented Training Officer.” Tony argued.

“Technically, yes, but not his main influence.” Stewart retorted, before leaning forward. “Tony, I have received reports from three other agents who witnessed the incident and not one of them so much as insinuated that they believed you were at fault. Not today, and certainly not in your training of Agent McGee. What I don’t understand, is why you disagree with them.”

Tony opened his mouth, before closing it again. He didn’t know what to say.
“I understand that, due to your time working with Gibbs, you are accustomed to taking the blame for things.” Stewart said eventually. “I had hoped that spending two months aboard the Reagan would cure you of the mindset that Gibbs had slapped into you, but I see that I was overly optimistic.”

“I understand, sir.” Tony acknowledged.

Stewart’s eyes narrowed. “What do you understand?”

Tony blinked. “That you no longer feel confident in my ability to serve as a team leader.”

“Damn it, Dinozzo!” Stewart snapped. “What did I just say? Nothing that happened today was your fault. I have every confidence in your ability to serve as a team leader. My only problem with you, is that you don’t seem to share my confidence. So here’s what we’re going to do. You are going to remain as the Team Lead of the second Major Crimes Response Team, and you’re going to spend the next four Friday afternoons in therapy.”

Tony’s jaw dropped open. “Therapy, sir?”

“Yes, therapy.” Stewart confirmed mercilessly. “Until you can sit in front of me, call me Paul, and acknowledge that you’re damn fine agent who is not at all responsible for Gibbs’ stupidity.”

“I know I’m a good agent, Paul.” Tony said, with as much confidence as he could muster. “And I’m aware that I’m not responsible for Gibbs’ decisions.”

Stewart huffed out a laugh. “Good try, Tony, but that doesn’t get you out of your four afternoons with a therapist. I’d make it more, but four sessions is all that NCIS will cover.”

Tony sighed. “Yes, s-Paul.”

“Excellent.” Stewart nodded, as though pleased with a job well done. “Now, in the interest of you hearing this first hand and not via the rumour mill, you should know that I have met with Agent Gibbs and Agent McGee. Agent McGee has received a formal reprimand in his file, been reminded of his status as a probational agent, and told that a repeat of today’s behaviour will result in the termination of his contract with NCIS.”

“But…” Tony stopped, not really sure what he had been planning on saying. “Surely it wasn’t that bad.”

“If this was the first sign of inappropriate behaviour, I would agree with you.” Stewart acknowledged. “But Agent McGee’s behaviour has been lacking almost since the day he arrived.”

“I think he has the potential to be a good agent without Gibbs’ influence.” Tony defended.

Stewart took off his glasses. “You just don’t give up on people, do you, Tony?”

Tony shrugged. “He was my probationary agent.”

“Fair enough.” Stewart leaned back in his chair. “I did suggest to Agent McGee that his career might be better served if he were to spend some time working under an agent other than Gibbs.”

Tony snorted. “I bet that went down well.”

“Not unlike a lead balloon.” Stewart confirmed, with a weary smile. “I’m not ashamed to admit that in the past I have been unwilling to confront Gibbs over certain issues - it has always felt like too much of an uphill battle.”
Tony could understand that. “It’s not worth dying on every hill.”

“No, it isn’t.” Stewart agreed. “However, if there was ever a time to choose a hill to die on, it’s the year before you retire. I will take your assessment of Agent McGee’s potential under advisement, and discuss the matter with Director Shepard.”

21-21-21

Tony walked out of his meeting with Stewart feeling as though he’d taken a football to the head. Nothing had gone the way he had expected it to. He certainly hadn’t expected to be forced into therapy. He hated therapy. But he had to admit that, if he’d been asked to choose between a demotion and therapy, he would have picked therapy. So, he couldn’t really blame Stewart for making that choice for him.

The sound of his phone ringing was a welcome distraction from the thoughts that were swirling around in his head - Therapy! He had to go to therapy! - and Tony quickly fished it out of his pocket before answering it.

“Special Agent Dinozzo speaking.”

“Hey, Tony,” JJ voice came through the line. “It’s JJ. How’s your day going so far.”

Tony pushed the button to stop the elevator in it’s tracks, before slumping back against one of the walls. “My day has been…I don’t even know if there are words for it.”

“What happened?” JJ’s concerned tone was a balm to Tony’s frazzled emotions.

“Our forensic tech is ignoring our evidence because her favourite team has a case as well, so my team’s case is pretty much stalled;” Tony started at the beginning of his bad day. “McGee had a go at me in front of the whole bullpen to the degree that I, and three other agents, had to write incident reports about it; I had to ask the only woman on my team whether she thought our victim had been ‘crying wolf’ in regards to her sexual harassment complaints - you should have seen her face. It was like I’d killed her cat or something - and our Assistant Director for Criminal Operations just ordered me to see a therapist. How’s your day been?”

“Wow, that’s a bad day,” JJ said, after a long pause. “Do you want to have dinner tonight, or just go home and pretend that today never happened?”

“Definitely dinner.” Tony said quickly, glancing at his watch. It was disappointing to realise that it was only three thirty. “If that’s alright, I mean. We did have dinner last night.”

“Tony, we’re dating, right?”

Tony’s stomach dropped. What kind of question was that?

“And I know that we’ve never actually had the ‘exclusivity discussion’, or the ‘titles discussion’ for that matter. But the way I see it, you’re my boyfriend - even if the term makes me feel like I’m in high school again - and that means that when you have a bad day - I want to do what I can to help you feel better.”

Tony rubbed a hand against his face, feeling far more emotional than the occasion called for. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had someone willing to make that kind of commitment to him. “Thank you, JJ. And, for what it matters, I’m all for exclusivity.”

“Thank goodness for that.” JJ sounded as though she was smiling. “So dinner tonight. Come over to
my place and we can make pizza and, um, you can plan to stay the night, if you want to.”

Tony could hardly find the words to describe just how much he wanted to. “I’ll head home after work to get a change of clothes then, so I’ll see you at six thirty?”

“Sounds good.” JJ confirmed. “Oh, by the way, the reason I was ringing was that Morgan told me there’s a series of articles that he think might help you with your case.”

“Yeah?” Tony asked. “What’s the name of the journal?”

“Not that kind of article. The ‘Washington Daily News’ have been publishing them. Morgan said they’re tell-all articles about gender equality in the Navy.”

“You’re sure it was the ‘Washington Daily News’?” Tony confirmed, anticipation building within him.

“Yes, why?”

“That’s where our victim’s husband works.” Tony answered, his mind racing as he considered the ramifications of the connection. “Tell Morgan thanks from me.”

“Sure.” JJ agreed. “And I’ll see you tonight?”

“Definitely.” Tony confirmed with a smile. “See you in a few hours.”
Chapter 22

It wasn’t until after she got off the phone with Tony, that JJ remembered that her apartment was a mess. Not a disgusting mess, like the apartments people made television shows about, but definitely messier than she was comfortable Tony seeing. She hadn’t actually done much housework since she’d got back from spending Christmas with her family, so pretty much every chore was due to be done. Which was unfortunate given that, by the time she bought ingredients for making pizza on the way home, she would have less than an hour to try and get her apartment up to standard. She was going to have to prioritize.

Which would have been fine, if Hotch hadn’t decided to pop into her office just a few minutes before five to let her know that Gideon had decided to ignore his doctor’s orders and return to work a week early. JJ couldn’t even pretend to be surprised, but she did wish that Hotch had chosen a different time to talk to her about it. Preferably a time when she hadn’t been counting down the seconds on clock before she was allowed to leave.

As though that wasn’t bad enough, Hotch seemed uncharacteristically chatty and it was almost twenty past five by the time JJ finally managed to escape down to her car. If she hadn’t known better, she’d almost think that Morgan had found out that she had a date and had put Hotch up to delaying her. Though, she knew that there was no way that Hotch would go along with something like that.

Still, it meant that by the time JJ had bought the pizza ingredients and gotten home, she only really had thirty minutes to return her apartment to a respectable standard. She was never putting house work off again.

The bedroom was the most obvious area that needed attention. It wasn’t too messy - there was just an unmade bed, a large hamper of dirty laundry, and a few clothes scattered across the floor - but given that she was hoping that she would finally get Tony in her bed, it was pretty high on her priority list. After the bedroom, came the desperately quick scrub of the toilet, the frantic tidying of the lounge, and the slightly more relaxed washing of the dishes. Tony probably wouldn’t judge her if he arrived to see her washing a load of dishes. And, thankfully, by the time Tony’s knock came, she’d managed to wash and dry enough dishes to obscure the fact that she hadn’t done her dishes in three days. (It just hadn’t been a good week for housework.)

JJ dried off her hands to answer the door, before gaping at the sight of Tony holding a enormous bouquet of flowers. How was he even real?

“Hey,” Tony smiled, handing her the flowers. “Sorry I’m a little later than I said I would be.”

JJ lifted the flowers up to face to smell them. “I can’t believe you got me these.”

“I figured I should probably make up for lost time. I only just realised on my way here that I haven’t bought you any flowers yet.”

JJ shook her head. “You don’t have any obligation to buy me flowers, Tony, but thank you. They’re gorgeous.”

“I didn’t know what kind of flowers to get you.” Tony admitted, following JJ into her apartment. “For future reference, what are your favourite flowers?”
“As of right now? These ones.” JJ said, referring to the entire bouquet. “Here you hold them for a moment while I find a vase. I don’t even know if I have a vase big enough for these.”

It didn’t take long for JJ to confirm her lack of large vases, which then left her awkwardly wondering what on earth she was supposed to do with the flowers. If Tony hadn’t been there, she probably would have put them in a large pot, but it seemed rude to do that while he was there. Still, it was looking as though her soup pot was her only option.

“Sorry,” Tony said, frowning down at the flowers. “I didn’t even consider how unpractical it would be. I could go buy you a vase?”

“No,” JJ shook her head, not even stopping to ponder the ridiculousness of the offer. “The flowers are beautiful enough to withstand being place in something ordinary. You won’t be offended if I put them in a pot?”

“Why would I be offended?”

“I don’t know,” JJ admitted, pulling the pot in question out of her cupboard. “It seems like the kind of thing some guys would be offended about though.”

“There’s no point in being offended over practicalities.” Tony pointed out. “Besides, I’m not all that easily offended.”

JJ emptied the dish water out of her sink to enable her to fill the pot with water. “What does offend you?”

“Well, the obvious ones - murder, theft, sexual assault, corruption,” Tony started, really seeming to think about it. “Uh, people presuming that I’m an idiot, or that I only got through college because of my family’s money…”

“Hold up,” JJ turned the faucet off so that she could give Tony her full attention. “Your family’s money? How much money does your family have?”

“It depends what side you’re talking about.” Tony commented. “Senior is currently broke. He’s… I really don’t have words to describe him, but I guess he’s a bit of a conman. He used to have a lot of money, but he’s lost it all now. My mum’s family, however, are very wealthy. I don’t have much to do with them, since they pretty much all paint me with the brush as Senior, but my mother left me a sizeable sum of money that Senior doesn’t know about.”

“And when you say sizeable?”

“Eight figures.” Tony answered, with a self depreciating shrug. “I haven’t spent any of it, aside from paying for college, but I do spend some of the interest.”

JJ knew that she was staring at him, but she honestly couldn’t stop. “I knew you had some money, I mean, you took me to Portofino’s, but that’s a lot of money.”

“I don’t really advertise it.” Tony commented, looking uncomfortable. “Most people know that Senior was rich, but then he pretty much disowned me when I was thirteen, so…”

JJ’s mouth fell open as Tony trailed off. “That’s awful!”

“That’s Senior for you.” Tony said bitterly.

JJ grimaced. “Oh, sorry. I invited you over to cheer you up after your bad day, and here I am asking
nosy questions about unhappy subjects. New topic, um…”

“Morgan’s tip about the articles was really helpful.” Tony said easily, handing JJ back the flowers so that she could put them in the pot. They looked ridiculous, but gorgeous at the same time. “Turns out that our victim was the author of the articles, which opens up a whole new motive for us.”

JJ wasn’t really convinced that this topic was much better than the one before it. “You think someone killed her because of the articles?”

“They don’t exactly portray the Navy in a positive light.” Tony pointed out. “Get a diehard sailor who is ready to die for their country and their navy, and they might just be willing to kill for their navy too.”

“That’s really messed up.” JJ sighed, turning her attention back to the dishes. “And I think we need a new conversation topic again.”

“Right, sorry.” Tony grimaced. “I don’t mean to be such a downer.”

“You’ve had a bad day,” JJ reminded him. “You can be whatever you need to be. I just thought you might like to talk about something to take your mind off that, but if you need to process through the badness we can do that too. I, for one, am a bit curious as to why you’ve been ordered to see a therapist.”

“It’s nothing bad.” Tony assured her quickly, picking up a dish towel and starting to dry the dishes as JJ washed them.

“I am so bad at conversation today.” JJ sighed. “Sorry, again, for being nosy about unhappy topics.”

“It’s fine.” Tony told her. “I guess if anyone deserves to know why I’m seeing a therapist, it’s my girlfriend. Basically, Director Stewart says I have to see a therapist until I can acknowledge that I’m a good agent and that I’m not responsible for Gibbs’ being Gibbs.”

“That sounds reasonable.” JJ commented, trying to keep her enthusiasm about the idea out of her voice. She could still remember Tony’s passing off his amazing undercover work as something that any agent could do.

“Hmm.” Tony looked doubtful. “Anyway, I never heard how your last year’s resolution went. Did you manage to read all of ‘Time Magazine’s’ top ten books’?”

JJ smiled, Tony was much better at picking conversation topics than she was. “Yeah, I did. I think the last time we talked about it I was reading a recipe book, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I finished that one pretty quickly and then spent November reading the last two.”

“I’m impressed.” Tony commented. “Do you have a New Year’s resolution for this year?”

JJ grimaced. “I did, but I’m not sure how long I’m going to last with it.”

“We’re only five days into the new year.” Tony laughed. “What did you pick? And please don’t say abstinence.”

JJ laughed. “Abstinence? Not a chance. I’ve been waiting three months to get you into bed. There’s no way I’m going to make myself wait another twelve.”
“You’ve been waiting to get me into bed?” Tony looked surprised. “And here I thought I was being a gentleman.”

“I was a bit surprised actually.” JJ admitted. “When Paula first told me about you she said that you came across as a real playboy, but that you were really sweet underneath. But I haven’t seen a hint of your alleged playboyness.”

Tony didn’t seem to know how to react to that. “Paula described me as a playboy and you still wanted to go out with me?”

“She said it was all an act.” JJ assured him. “And, yeah, you were a real charmer on our first date, but I wouldn’t have described you as a playboy. Still, I didn’t think I’d have to wait three months for you to make a move.”

Tony looked almost embarrassed. “I didn’t want to make a move too soon.”

“So you waited three months?” JJ asked in disbelief.

“Technically I was away for almost two months of that.” Tony defended. “So we’ve only really been dating just over a month.”

“Uh, no,” JJ argued firmly. “You don’t get to change our anniversary date. Because three months into a relationship it is perfectly reasonable for me to offer to clear out a drawer for you so that you can keep some stuff here, but if we’d only been dating for one month it would make me look crazy.”

Tony’s mouth dropped open. “You want me to have a drawer here?”

“I do.” JJ confirmed, ignoring her rising anxiety levels. “Which is perfectly reasonable. Because we’ve been dating for three months.”

Tony shook his head with a laugh. “You’re amazing.”

“Is that a yes, I’ll leave my toothbrush here, JJ?” JJ asked, with narrowed eyes.

Tony set down the plate that he’d been drying, before stepping forward and kissing her. JJ wrapped her wet and soapy hands around Tony’s neck and deepened the kiss. Kissing Tony was definitely her favourite thing to do.

Eventually, Tony broke their kiss and leaned his forehead against JJ’s. “Yes, JJ,” He said, sounding slightly out of breath. “I’ll leave my toothbrush here.”

22-22-22

Tony walked into work the next morning with a definite bounce in his step, and not just because he had finally gotten JJ into bed - which sounded far too cold for what had happened, but consummated their relationship sounded ridiculously formal, and made love to JJ hinted at things that he really wasn’t ready to think about.

Yes, spending the night with JJ had been incredible, but so had been waking up beside her. They’d eaten breakfast together, gone for a run (since regular runs were apparently JJ’s New Year’s resolution), eaten breakfast together, and kissed each other goodbye as they left for work. It had been so wonderfully (and terrifyingly) domestic, and Tony couldn’t wait to do it again. He wanted to do it every morning for the rest of his life (which was completely crazy, since three months was way too soon to be thinking about forever).
“Morning, Tony.” Asher greeted him, as Tony walked past his desk. “You look awfully happy this morning.”

Tony tried unsuccessfully to wipe the smile off his face. “Good morning, Asher.”

Asher’s eyes narrowed. “Any good news you want to share?”

“I have a good feeling about our case.” Tony offered, settling behind his desk. “I’ve been thinking that, if the articles are the motive, it won’t be Pascoe or Santos. Anyone willing to murder for the honour of the navy, wouldn’t sexually harass a female officer. So I think we need to split into two teams. You and Wardle take the sexual harassment motive, and Francis and I will take the articles. I’ll send you everything I’ve got on Santos, and get Francis to do the same with Pascoe.”

Asher nodded considering. “We should interview the husband again. See if our victim mentioned any names to him. Do you want to do that or should I?”

“You do it.” Tony decided. “I didn’t make a great impression, so a fresh face will probably be useful. Just give Wardle a heads up before you go in. Francis found our interview with him a bit unsettling.”

“Can do.” Asher agreed. “And, just so you know, I don’t buy that your weak ass excuse for that smile on your face, but I’m going to let it go. Because your my boss, and because Barb would disapprove if she knew I was trying to pressure you into kissing and telling.”

Tony shook his head. “Your imagination is getting away from you there, Asher, but I’m glad you’re letting Barb’s influence rub off on you.”

Francis and Wardle arrived a few minutes later and, after giving them their instructions for the day, Tony dialed the Forensic Lab.

“This is Abby!”

Tony’s stomach dropped, he’d really been hoping that Charles would answer the phone. “Abby, this is Tony.”

“Oh,” Abby’s tone said it all. “You’re just going to have to wait, Tony. I don’t have time to sort through all your crap right now. Gibbs’ case is…”

“Gibbs didn’t even get his case until after we submitted our evidence.” Tony interrupted, his jaw tight.

“Yeah, cos everything’s about you, isn’t it, Tony?” Abby retorted. “You know there are two other teams besides you and Gibbs, right? You didn’t think that maybe I was busy processing their evidence?”

“Alright,” Tony acknowledged, though it certainly didn’t explain why Abby had skipped his evidence in the queue. “Sure. But you’ve had our evidence for almost forty eight hours. You can’t seriously tell me that you haven’t processed any of it yet.”

“What are you going to do?” Abby asked provocingly. “File another complaint against me? Try and ruin my career like you tried to ruin McGee’s?”

Tony ran a hand through his hair. “I didn’t do anything to McGee.”

“Yeah, that’s why he has a reprimand in his file.” Abby retorted sarcastically.
Tony closed his eyes. “I’m not going to argue with you, Abby. When can I expect the results from my evidence?”

“You’ll get it when you get it, Tony.” Abby snapped, before the phone line went dead.

Tony groaned. “Well, that couldn’t have gone any worse.”

“Guess we’ll need a confession then.” Asher commented evenly.

Clenching his teeth, Tony turned to his computer and pulled up a blank incident report form. Abby’s temper tantrum was significantly decreasing their chances of catching Lieutenant Wilkins’ murderer, and he wasn’t going to put future cases at risk by not reporting her behaviour.

Despite his determination to fill out the complaint, Tony had expected to spend the whole day mentally obsessing about whether he’d done the right thing. Except, he didn’t have time. Somehow, through plain old police work and deduction, his team had managed to narrow their list of suspects down to four by lunchtime. Which meant that Tony’s afternoon was spent watching Asher interrogate each of the four. It didn’t take long to eliminate two of them - since both Seaman Santos and Seaman Ellis had bulletproof alibis - which just left two.

Petty Officer Pascoe, who was on the brink of being dishonourably discharged as a result of Lieutenant Wilkins’ repeated complaints against him, and Lieutenant Commander Phillips, who had a reputation for being a real hard ass when it came to defending the Navy’s honour and whose progression up the ranks had been stalled due to a violent incident five years previously.

Tony had never enjoyed bringing officers in for questioning, and he certainly didn’t like the idea of doing so without any forensic evidence to back him up, but neither was he willing to sit on his ass until Abby finally processed their results. And it was a good thing too, since Phillips was a surprisingly easy nut for Asher to crack.

It took all of fifteen minutes, for Asher to get Lieutenant Commander Phillips so worked up that he had ranted at length about his hatred for Wilkins, his disgust with her disrespect of the Navy, and his convoluted plan to kill her. And just like that, Tony’s first case with his new team was closed.
Chapter 23

“So, Tony, how did you find last week’s homework?”

Tony slouched back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling to avoid the piercing gaze of the psychologist that he’d been seeing for the last three weeks. Not that it would do him any good. Elton Stirling was nothing like the various psychologists and counselors that Tony had run circles around over the years. He actually saw through Tony’s masks and excuses. Though, Tony had to admit that his excuses were a lot weaker than they had been in the past. Probably because there was a part of him that wanted to be healthy and functional - if only for the sake of JJ and his new team.

“Tony?” Elton asked again.

“It was fine.”

“Right.” Elton sounded understandable disbelieving. “Did you manage to write out a list of negative and down-putting comments you remember Agents Gibbs making about or to you?”

“It wasn’t easy.” Tony admitted, moving his gaze to the potted plant that sat in the corner of the room. It was very green and shiny.

“Because you found it hard to remember many? Or because remembering them brought about an emotional response for you?”

“Both.” Tony admitted, stretching out his neck as his shoulders started for feel tense.

“That’s understandable.” Elton told him seriously. “How many comments did you manage to remember?”

Sighing, Tony reached down to his bag and pulled out the rumpled sheet of paper that he had filled with different comments that he had managed to remember over the week.

Elton took the paper when Tony offered it, eyebrows raised. “That’s a lot. Do you know how many there are?”
“Forty seven.”

“And these were all from memory?”

“Most of them,” Tony answered. “I added a few more after Gibbs and my conversation this morning.”

Elton set the paper on the table beside him. “You spoke to Gibbs today?”

Tony snorted. “More like Gibbs spoke to me.”

“Was this your first interaction with Gibbs since you left his team last year?”

“The second.” Tony corrected. “He confronted me a few days before my first session with you.”

Elton frowned. “I don’t remember you telling me about that.”

“I didn’t.” Tony explained shortly.

“So which of your interactions with Gibbs would you like to discuss first?”

Tony sighed. “There’s not much to discuss. Three weeks ago Gibbs confronted me about the fact that I’d written a formal complaint against Abby. He said some things, growled a lot, threatened to kick my ass, hit me over the head, and stormed off.”

“He hit you over the head?” Elton repeated slowly.

Tony waved a hand dismissively. “It’s a thing he does.”
“Right,” Elton said. “So what did you do?”

Tony resisted the urge to hunch his shoulders in. “Nothing.”

“It sounds to me as though Gibbs broke quite a few the NCIS regulations.” Elton commented neutrally.

“Yeah,” Tony snorted. “When doesn’t he?”

“But you didn’t file a formal complaint against him?”

“No.”

“Why did you file one against Abby, but not Gibbs?”

“Abby’s actions were obstructing my team’s ability to solve our case.” Tony explained. “Gibbs was just being his usual self.”

“Would you have filed a complaint if Gibbs had hit one of your teammates?”

Tony frowned. “Of course.”

“So why are you different?”

“I can handle it.” Tony shrugged. “I survived four years with Gibbs.”

“And yet you’re in here with me.”

Tony grimaced, he didn’t really have an answer for that.
“What about your conversation with Gibbs earlier today?”

“It was much of the same.” Tony answered shortly. “Threatening, growling, a head slap or two. Gibbs isn’t really all that creative.”

“What prompted it? Have you filed another complaint against Abby?”

“I haven’t had to.” Tony said, seeing a possible way to distract Elton. “She’s been put on probation, so she’s been toeing the line like it’s a tightrope. All the other team leaders have commented about how much of a difference it made for their cases. I think that if she was to try and go back now, one of them would probably make the complaint before I could.”

“Why didn’t any of them complain before?”

“Because Gibbs bite is just as bad as his bark.” Tony explained. “Sometimes it’s just not worth bothering.”

“But you think they’d bother now?”

“They’ve seen how much easier it is to solve cases when their evidence is processed in good time.” Tony explained.

“And they’ve seen someone stand up to Gibbs and survive.” Elton commented evenly.

Tony shrugged uncomfortably. Somehow Elton always managed to turn his distractions back into discomforting moments.

“So what prompted your interaction with Gibbs?”

Tony sighed, Elton was like a dog with a bone. “His junior agent was reassigned to a different team - a team in San Diego of all places - and he blames me.”

“Why?”
“Because I was the one who suggested to Paul that McGee be removed from Gibbs’ influence.”

“You were concerned for his safety?”

“I was concerned for his career.” Tony corrected. “Gibbs gets away with being a bastard because he’s Gibbs. It’s pretty much expected of him at this point. But he was teaching McGee his bad habits, and it was going to get McGee fired one day.”

“And so Gibbs confronted you to protest your interference with his team?” Elton asked. “How did he know that you were involved?”

Tony snorted. “I think it was pretty obvious to everyone. No one considered reassigning McGee until I left the team. And Gibbs doesn’t protest things, he changes them. He cornered me in the elevator to tell me that, if I didn’t make Paul change his mind, he was going to ‘put his foot so far up my ass’, blah, blah, blah.”

“You’re not worried?”

“What’s he going to do?” Tony asked. “Attack me in a dark alley? The worst Gibbs can do is use his weird, flirty relationship with the Director to get me fired, which would definitely suck, but I think I could probably rely on Paul to give me a good reference.”

“I would say so.” Elton agreed. “He seems to think quite highly of you, and he clearly respects your opinion if he was willing to reassign an agents on your suggestion.” He picked up Tony’s homework again. “Which of these come from this morning?”

“The bottom three.”

“So he accused you of being ‘threatened by Agent McGee’s skill?’”

“That’s why he thinks I had McGee transferred.” Tony explained.
“And how did that make you feel?”

Tony barely managed to contain his snort at Elton’s dry tone. At least the man was aware of how much of a stereotype he sounded like sometimes.

“Like Gibbs is a jerk.” Tony answered flatly. “Not to mention a control freak. I might have believed him six months ago, in fact I probably would have, but not anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not as isolated as I was before.” Tony explained. “I never really interacted with the other agents when I was Gibbs’ SFA, aside from Asher that is, but now I talk to the other agents on a daily basis. And nobody, aside from Gibbs, Abby, and McGee, thinks that McGee is particularly good for anything. He might be smart, but unless he gets an attitude adjustment he’ll never make it past Junior Agent. I’ve got nothing to feel threatened about.”

“And Gibbs’ other comments?” Elton asked, looking back at the paper.

“Well, I know that I didn’t suggest that McGee be reassigned because I’m petty. And he didn’t actually call me useless, he just insinuated it.” Tony admitted, slouching down in his chair again. “The whole spiel was too long to write out in full, but that was the jist of it.”

“That one seems to have impacted you more than the others.”

Tony frowned. “I know I’m not useless.”

Elton didn’t say anything.

“I know I’m not useless.” Tony said again. “My team has solved eleven cases in four weeks. Admittedly, a few of those were open and shut cases, but it’s still pretty impressive.”

Elton just watched Tony patiently.
“Paul wouldn’t have put me in charge of a team if he thought I was useless,” Tony added, when the silence became too much for him.

“So why do you think Gibbs’ insinuation that you were useless affect your more than his other comments?” Elton asked searchingly.

“I don’t know.” Tony admitted wearily. He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Maybe because I still struggle to understand why Paul promoted me. I know I’m not ‘useless’, but I’m not really sure what use I am either.”

“You said your team has solved eleven cases?”

“Yeah, but that was my team, not me. I just gave them room to work.”

“What was their usual monthly solve rate before you joined the team?”

“I don’t know.” Tony admitted. “Less than eleven, I think. If their excitement over our success is anything to go by.”

“So clearly your leadership is making some positive impact.”

“Or it’s all a fluke.” Tony retorted quickly, before wincing. This is why he hated talking Elton. The man always managed to use his sneaky powers of psychology to get Tony to say things that he’d never otherwise say.

“An eleven case long fluke?” Elton asked doubtfully.

Tony rubbed at his face tiredly. “I know, but it’s the most likely explanation.”

“Even when you add to the equation that Assistant Director Stewart considered you worth promoting?”

Tony rubbed his face wearily. He really hated therapy.
“Tony.” McGee greeted coldly, pushing himself off Tony’s car.

Tony groaned quietly. He’d known that a confrontation with McGee was coming, but he’d foolishly hoped that it would wait. He was tired and wrung out from the hour he’d spent with Elton, and he really just wanted to get to JJ’s house and learn how to make potato gnocchi. Though, on the bright side, at least McGee had made sure that they wouldn’t have an audience this time.

“Now’s not a good time, McGee.”

McGee scoffed. “It’s not a good time for me to be shipped off to San Diego either, but that didn’t stop you from screwing up my life.”

“It’s not going to screw up your life.”

“Gibbs is the best!” McGee snapped.

Tony sighed. “Gibbs isn’t as impressive as you think he is, McGee.”

“He has the best solve rate in the agency…”

“But not the best conviction rate.” Tony interrupted, before McGee could really get going. “What’s the point in knowing who committed a crime if you can’t prove it?”

“That’s not Gibbs’ fault!”

“Why not?” Tony asked, letting his bag drop to the ground beside his feet. “If the blame doesn’t lie with Gibbs, who does it lie with?”

“We provide all the evidence needed to put criminals away.” McGee replied stubbornly. “It’s not our
fault that some of it can’t be used. It’s all the stupid bureaucracy that goes on. It’s why Rule Thirteen exists."

“It is absolutely our fault when a confession gets thrown out because the suspect was intimidated into giving it.” Tony argued.

McGee’s expression was almost petulant. “It shouldn’t matter.”

Tony stared at him. “This is why you’re being sent to San Diego.”

“Because you’re jealous?!” McGee asked, his face twisting angrily.

“Because you believe all of Gibbs’ crap.” Tony corrected. “Because you have the potential to be a good agent, but at the moment you’re one straw away from being fired.”

“They wouldn’t fire me!” McGee protested defensively. “I have a double major and my Masters.”

Tony snorted. “Who doesn’t?”

“Uh, you.” McGee replied as though it was obvious. “You barely even managed to get your degree in Phys. Ed from Ohio State.”

“I had a second major, McGee.” Tony told him wearily. “And I have my Masters in Criminology. Didn’t you ever wonder how I could have become Gibbs’s SFA without a graduate degree?”

“What?” McGee looked almost betrayed.

“NCIS regulations state that all Senior Field Agents and Team Leads need to have some kind of graduate degree.” Tony reminded him patiently. “Most of us just don’t feel the need to constantly advertise them.”

McGee shook his head. “They still wouldn’t fire me! I’m a good agent.”
“You’re a probie.” Tony corrected. “A probie who is regularly insubordinate and doesn’t follow orders. Why wouldn’t they fire you?”

McGee’s face reddened and he drew himself angrily. “I just figured it out. You’re trying to get me fired!”

Tony’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

“It won’t work!” McGee continued. “Gibbs will never let them fire me. Just like he’ll never let them transfer me to San Diego! You can’t get rid of me that easily, Tony!”

“McGee, we worked together for a year. You know me. You know that I would never try and get you fired.”

McGee’s lip curled up into a sneer. “I guess I don’t you as well as I thought I did.”

Tony clenched his jaw in frustration, before decided there was no point in arguing. He bent down to pick up his bag and then speared McGee with a glare. “Get out of my way, Agent McGee.”

McGee, who was still standing between Tony and his car, glared back. “We’re not done yet, Tony.”

“Yes, we are.” Tony retorted. “I’ve tried to help you. I’ve defended you to every agent whose talked crap about you. Hell, I’ve defended you to Director Stewart. But this is me giving up on you. You can do whatever the hell you want, but whatever connection that we might have had from having worked together is gone. You try confronting me like this again and I’ll write you up for it. Now get the hell out of my way, Probationary Agent McGee!”

23-23-23

“Welcome back.”

JJ leaned into Tony’s embrace and wished that she could come home to a hug like this every day. “I
was only gone for three days.”

“Yeah, well, I still missed you.” Tony admitted, and JJ could feel the underside of his chin sitting on her head.

“I missed you too.” JJ agreed, her cheek resting against Tony’s shoulder. “Especially your hugs.”

“I do give great hugs.” Tony agreed. “How was your case?”

“Awful.” JJ shuddered at the thought. “Just being in the same room as Jacob Dawes made me feel slimy. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone so evil before.”

“They put you in the same room as him?” Tony’s arms tightened around her.

“It was my idea.” JJ admitted, regret pooling in her stomach. “He likes blondes, so I thought I might be able to sweeten him up or something. Fat lot of good it did us though.”

“The news said that you found another victim.”

“Yeah, Gideon and Hotch are sure that there’s more, but Jacob wouldn’t admit to anything.” JJ shuddered again. “The worst part of it all is that Gideon is sure that Sarah Jean was innocent.”

Tony stiffened slightly. “Innocent?”

“Yeah,” JJ sighed. “But we couldn’t find proof enough to get a stay of execution for her.”

“That sounds like a beyond awful case!” Tony said with feeling. “Are you sure you want me here?”

JJ tightened her grip on the back of Tony’s shirt. “I love having you here. I’d ask you to move in with me if it wasn’t way too soon.”
Tony let out a surprised sound. “Really?”

JJ bit the inside of her cheek in embarrassment, glad that Tony couldn’t see the blush spreading across her cheeks. She hadn’t meant to let that piece of information slip for at least another couple of months. “Yeah. I know it’s stupid, and way too soon, but I love coming home to spend an evening with you. It makes my crappy days feel so much better.”

“I know the feeling.” Tony admitted. “My day hasn’t been nearly as bad as yours, but it’s nice to be able to get her and let it all go.”

JJ loosened her grip on Tony’s shirt and stepped back. “This extending cuddling thing would be a lot more comfortable on the couch.”

Tony chuckled. “I love how direct you are. Do you still want to make gnocchi tonight? Or shall we just order pizza?”

JJ winced apologetically. “I know we said we’d make gnocchi, but…”

“Say no more.” Tony smiled reassuringly, linking his fingers with hers. “We’ll make gnocchi another night when you haven’t just come home from an awful case. Tonight we can just eat pizza and do whatever you think will help take your mind off the case.”

JJ could feel warmth spreading across her chest and before she knew it she was speaking without thinking again. “I love you.”

Tony froze, his hand slipping away from JJ’s. “What?”

“Oh,” JJ’s stomach twisted nervously. “I love you?”

“Really?”

“I know it’s too soon.” JJ said, for the second time in five minutes. She really needed to get a better grip on her tongue. “We’ve only been dating four months and…”
“I love you too.” Tony interrupted her.

JJ stared at him. “You do?”

“I do.” Tony said, a smile spreading across his face. “I definitely do and, for the record, I’m with you on the moving in together thing.”

“What part of it?” JJ asked carefully. “The ‘wanting to ask me’ part, or the ‘it’s way too soon’ part?”

Tony chuckled. “Both.”

“Tony, you’ve never even invited me over to your apartment.” JJ pointed out.

“That’s because I only have a single bed.”

“You what?”

“I only have a single bed.” Tony repeated. “But I’ve been planning on getting a bigger one. I just thought that, if I waited a few months, you might help me pick one out.”

JJ blinked. “You want me to go bed shopping with you?”

Tony shifted in place. “Uh, only if you want to. I mean, I know it’s too soon…”

“What even is too soon?” JJ asked rhetorically. “Whose rules are we going by here?”

“Society’s, I think.”

“Well, society is stupid.” JJ decided, stepping towards Tony so that she could hug him again. “If we
want to be in love, go bed shopping and move in together after four months, then we should do all those things.”

Tony’s gulp was actually audible. “You want to move in together?”

JJ craned her head back so that she could see Tony’s face. “Wasn’t that just what we were talking about?”

“Yes, but…”

“You don’t want to.” JJ finished for him. She stepped away from Tony, feeling unreasonably disappointed. She could hardly be upset that her boyfriend didn’t want to move in with her after four months.

“I do.” Tony corrected quickly. “I just haven’t lived with a woman since Wendy.”

JJ winced. “Was she the one who broke off your engagement?”

“That’s the one.” Tony confirmed bitterly.

“Right,” JJ frowned, she could see how that would be off putting. “Well, how about we table this conversation and decide to have it again in a month?”

“So we move in together in a month?”

“No, we have the conversation again then.” JJ explained. “That way we can both use the month to get used to the idea and figure out if it’s what we really want.”

Tony looked relieved. “Okay, that sounds good.”

“Great.” JJ tried not to feel too disappointed by Tony’s relief. “Now, how about you order us some pizza, I’ll make us drinks, and then we can sit and cuddle on the couch while you tell me about your bad day.”
Tony couldn’t think of any better way to start a morning than waking up next to JJ. She was so beautiful, sprawled out across the bed, and not even the fact that she was taking up most of the bed ruined his enjoyment of the sight. Though, it did make him think that they should probably buy a bigger bed. He’d have to tell JJ that he wanted a king sized bed when they went shopping together. Then, when they moved in together, he could suggest they keep his bed and send her double one off to a Salvation Army store.

Wait, ‘when they moved in together’? When had that suddenly become a foregone conclusion? Because Tony didn’t remember his brain being all that on board with the idea when he and JJ had discussed it the evening before. In fact, he could still remember JJ’s hurt expression when he’d suddenly gone back on his statement about wanting to move in with her.

He could still remember why he’d backtracked so suddenly. The doubts that he would somehow screw everything up like he’d done with Wendy were still there. They just didn’t seem nearly as large as they had the night before. After all, he hadn’t been solely to blame for Wendy breaking up with him. (In fact, he still hadn’t been able to figure out what he’d done wrong.) And he and JJ worked in a way that he and Wendy never had. Their relationship was so easy, almost effortless, and he couldn’t imagine that moving in together would change that.

Tony glanced back to where JJ’s face was squashed into her pillow as she slept and wondered if he should tell her that he had changed his mind. It was a Saturday, and both he and JJ had the day off. If they wanted to they could probably get her halfway moved into his apartment before the end of the weekend. Presuming that she wanted to move into his apartment that was. (Though he couldn’t imagine why she wouldn’t. His apartment was bigger, nicer, and closer to both their workplaces.)

Except, JJ’s idea about waiting a month was probably a good one though. That way they could both be completely sure that they wanted to make the move. Not to mention that JJ was probably more likely to be interested in moving into Tony’s apartment if she had spent some time there. Maybe they could buy the bed today and then spend the night there christening it.

JJ shifted, tugging the blankets tighter around her, and seemed to try and bury her face in her pillow.

Tony grinned in amusement. JJ was so adorable early in the morning - even when she tried to steal the blankets away from him. “Good morning.”

JJ made an unimpressed noise. “What time is it?”
“Almost half past eight.” Tony answered, glancing towards the bedside clock. “We slept in.”

“No wonder I feel so groggy.” JJ groaned, without opening her eyes. “I must have gotten too much sleep.”

Tony grinned. “Lucky you.”

JJ’s eyes opened slightly. “You didn’t sleep well?”

“I probably would have,” Tony answered. “But a little, blonde octopus kept whacking me with all her legs.”

“Oh no!” JJ’s eyes flew open. “Did I kick you?”

“Like a wild horse.” Tony teased. “I think we should go bed shopping today and get me a king sized bed.”

JJ groaned in mortification. “I’m sorry! I can’t believe I forgot to be careful not to kick you.”

“It’s fine.” Tony assured her with a laugh. “I think I’ll take it as a compliment that you’re comfortable enough with me in your bed that you don’t even notice.”

“I can’t believe I kicked you.” JJ buried her head back into her pillow. “It’s so embarrassing.”

“Don’t worry about.” Tony leant over so he could kiss her hair. “But I’m serious about the bed shopping, if you don’t have other plans today.”

“I just have some chores I need to do.” JJ offered. “And then we’ve got that dinner thing with your colleagues tonight.”

“Oh, yeah,” Tony remembered. “We’re supposed to be bringing dessert. What shall we make?”
“Didn’t you say last week that you wanted to learn to make Tiramisu?” JJ asked. “We could make that?”

“I’m not going to say no.” Tony said eagerly. “So how does this sound for our plan for the day? We get up, do your chores, go out for brunch, buy a bed and get it moved to my apartment, buy ingredients for Tiramisu, make it, go to Asher and Barb’s, and then go back to my place to christen the new bed?”

JJ laughed. “Don’t you have your own chores to do?

“I’ll do them tomorrow.” Tony decided. “So, what do you think?”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” JJ agreed. “Were you planning on making the Tiramisu here, or at your apartment?”

My apartment is closer to Asher and Barb’s.” Tony pointed out. “It would save us from driving back and forward.”

“Do you even have the things we need to make Tiramisu in your kitchen?”

“That depends,” Tony hedged. “What do we need?”

“Um,” JJ’s forehead creased as she considered the question. “In order? A double boiler, a whisk, a mixing bowl, an electric beater…”

“I’m going to stop you right there and say, no, I don’t think I have any of those things.” Tony admitted. “But we can buy them.”

“Spoken like a true millionaire.” JJ teased. “How about I just bring the things we need from here?”

“Okay,” Tony agreed easily. “I guess there’s no point in me buying a new set when we’ll be moving in together in a month anyway.”
JJ’s eyebrows climbed up her forehead. “We are, are we?”

Tony winced. “I mean, probably, maybe moving in together.”

JJ laughed. “Right. Though, I’ll tell you now that my double boiler is actually just a metal bowl that I put in a pot. So if you wanted to buy a proper one, well, I wouldn’t stop you.”

“We should go kitchen shopping sometime.” Tony decided. “You can help me buy everything you’ve ever dreamed of having in your kitchen.”

JJ raised herself up on her elbow, before leaning forward to kiss him. “I love you, Tony.”

Tony smiled against her lips. “You’re just saying that because I’m going to buy you the kitchen of your dreams.”

“Well, I’m definitely not saying it because of the taste of your morning breath.” JJ retorted, with a teasing smile.

Tony’s mouth dropped open in surprise. “I can’t believe you just said that!”

24-24-24

JJ had bought her bed when she’d graduated with her undergraduate degree and moved to Washington DC. She hadn’t had much money at the time, so she gotten the base second hand and had bought a new mattress with the $200 her grandparents had given her as a graduation present. Because of her tight budget she had only had a few mattresses to choose from and in the end had only been able to buy the mattress she chose because it was on sale.

Shopping with Tony was a whole different experience.

Not the least because Tony let her into the kind of furniture shore that JJ had only ever dreamed of one day being rich enough to afford. The cheapest sofa she could see was over $1000 and JJ
couldn’t help but feel conspicuous - as though everyone could tell that she had no business being in a store where couches cost more than her weekly paycheck.

Tony didn’t seem to have any such insecurities (probably because he could probably have bought every piece of furniture in the store and still be a millionaire). He just swept through the store, towards the bedroom section, with a confidence that JJ envied.

“So we’re agreed on a king, right?” Tony asked, as he stopped at the first bed that had a upholstered headboard. It sort of looked like a couch, and JJ couldn’t help but consider how comfortable it would be to lean against.

“Yeah,” JJ could feel her cheeks flushing at the reminder that she’d kicked Tony during the night. “That sounds good.”

“What do you think of this one?”

JJ looked at the pricetag, more out of habit that anything, and turned to stare at Tony. “It’s more than $3000?!”

“Can I help you?” A smooth voice interrupted, and JJ was sure that she wasn’t just imagining the disapproving glance the sales lady gave her.

“We’re just looking at the moment.” Tony answered, barely sparing the woman a glance. “I’ll let you know when we have questions.”

“Of course.” The woman demurred, before leaving them to it.

“Money isn’t a problem, JJ.” Tony said, once the woman had moved out of hearing distance. “Now, do you like the fabric, or would you prefer wood?”

What followed was a shopping trip unlike anything JJ had ever experienced. Not only was Tony completely unphased by ridiculously expensive furniture, but he encouraged JJ to help him test out each available mattress so that they could find the most comfortable one.
Then, as though things hadn’t been strange enough, Tony decided to buy an entire bedroom set - because apparently matching bedroom furniture was thing - and then looked completely unphased when he was asked to pay over $10,000 for his purchases.

“And we should you a double boiler set while we’re at it. What is a double boiler, anyway?”

And then JJ saw Tony’s apartment.

She wasn’t sure why it hadn’t occurred to her that Tony might live in a large and expensive looking apartment, especially considering the way she’d just watched Tony spend several hundred dollars on a set of sheets, but it hadn’t. She’d always just presumed that Tony lived in an apartment like her one - small, decent, and affordable on a federal agent’s salary. Instead Tony’s apartment was large, stylish, and definitely expensive.

It made her a little embarrassed for the amount of time she and Tony had spent in her apartment. Though clearly Tony hadn’t minded enough to stop coming over.

Possibly the most interesting part of the apartment, was the baby grand piano that sat in the corner of living room. It was beautiful, and looked as though it belonged in a mansion of some kind rather than an apartment. JJ hadn’t even known that Tony played.

“What do you think?” Tony asked, sounding almost nervous.

“It’s amazing!” JJ told him honestly. “I can’t believe you’ve been holding out on me all this time.”

Tony chuckled. “Sorry about that. I’ve sort of had this thing about never inviting anyone to my apartment.”

“And when you say anyone?”

“Well, not including delivery and repair men, I can count the number of people I’ve had up here on one hand.” Tony admitted. “And that’s including you.”
“Then I’m honoured.” JJ told him seriously, her gaze gravitating back to the piano. “I didn’t know you played the piano.”

“Since I was a kid.” Tony answered her unasked question. “I play the guitar too, but not half as well as I play the piano.”

“You’ll have to play for me one day.” JJ told him, before turning her attention the kitchen. “I really can’t believe that you never told me that you had my dream kitchen.”

“Your dream kitchen?” Tony sounded skeptical.

“Pretty much.” JJ confirmed, taking in the beautiful stovetop and fridge that looked as though they had stepped straight out of a magazine. “I can’t wait to start making dessert.”

Tony cleared his throat. “So if, let’s say, we maybe move in together in a month, you wouldn’t mind moving in here?”

“Mind?” JJ asked, turning on the spot so she could look over the apartment again. “Tony, only a crazy person would choose my apartment over your apartment. And I am not a crazy person.”

Tony didn’t reply and, when JJ turned to look at him, she saw an insecure expression on his face.

“Tony? Are you alright?”

Tony’s adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “What would you say if I said I had changed my mind?”

“About what?” JJ asked, though she presumed it had something to do with them moving in together. Had he decided that he didn’t ever want to move in with her? Or that…

“What if I wanted to move in with you now?”

JJ’s heart soared. “Are you sure?”
“It’s pretty much a foregone conclusion that we’re going to do it. So why wait a whole month?”

“An excellent point.” JJ agreed wholeheartedly. “Are you sure you won’t change your mind, though? You seemed pretty against it yesterday.”

Tony looked apologetic. “I woke up this morning thinking about what we would do when we moved in together. It just feels right.”

“Yeah,” JJ stepped forward so that she could wrap her hands around Tony. “Yeah, it does.”

24-24-24

JJ had never been the kind of girl to sit on the sidelines and watch the boys play sport. She’d always been right in there with them and had, more often than not, put her nose up at the girls who did choose to sit on the sidelines.

That being said, JJ couldn’t begrudge herself for choosing to sit and talk with the woman on this particular occasion. Not only did she have exciting news that she was dying to share with someone, but Barb had brought a picnic basket with tea and biscuits for them to enjoy while the men ran around and got sweaty. Besides, she knew that Tony was hoping that the basketball game would help Andrew Marshall bond with him and Asher, and her playing would probably have gotten in the way of their male bonding.

It felt strangely domestic to sit on a picnic blanket with Barb and Margie Marshall and watch their significant others face play basketball together. The men had started off playing one-on-one-on-one but after ten minutes had changed things around so Andrew and Asher was playing against Tony. Amazingly, Tony was still beating them. JJ could definitely see why he’d been expected to go pro.

“Do you have children, Margie?” Barb asked, pulling JJ’s attention away from the men on the court.

“I have teenagers.” Margie answered, with a wry smile. “Eighteen, fifteen, and thirteen. My eldest, Rosie, is a freshman at the University of Michigan.”

JJ’s jaw dropped, suddenly feeling her youth. She’d known that Barb and Margie were older than
her, but she hadn’t known they were that much older! She was only ten years older than Margie’s
daughter.

Barb looked surprised too. “Teenagers? You must have started young.”

Margie laughed. “Well, I was twenty two when I had Rosie. Andrew and I met in college, and got
married the summer after I graduated. Rosie was born six months later. My grandparents were
horrified.”

“At least you wouldn’t have been showing too much for your wedding.” Barb said, her hand resting
on her mostly flat stomach.

“Except my stomach suddenly popped six days before the wedding.” Margie said, sounding amused.
“One day, I had the slightest curve, the next day I had a definite bump. Thankfully I’d planned for
that possibility and had left a significant seam allowance in the dress, so it only took a few hours to
make the alterations.”

JJ was impressed. “You made your own dress?”

Margie smiled proudly. “Yes, and all the bridesmaid dresses too. I would have made a cumberbund
and bowtie for Andrew and his groomsmen, by they were all in their dress uniforms.”

“Oh, I’d love to see your photos.” Barb exclaimed. “I love a man in uniform. I keep telling Asher
that I think that NCIS should bring in a uniform for all their agents.”

“The sight of Andrew in uniform is the only thing I miss about being married to a marine.” Margie
admitted.

“Does he still have a uniform to pull out for special occasions?” Barb asked, her eyes sparkling. “Or
at the end of a spectacular date night?”

Margie laughed. “Let’s just say that we really enjoy the nights when Angela and Jordan are both
staying with friends.”
“Okay, wow.” JJ shook her head, as she laughed along with the other women.

“It’s the one thing I’m not looking forward to about being a mom.” Barb admitted, her hand resting on her stomach again. “My sisters have all told me that having a baby is pretty much a death sentence to your sex life.”

“It is for the first few months.” Margie admitted. “There’s nothing quite like pushing a human being out of your vagina to put you out of the mood. But after that it’s really just a matter of prioritising. Not including the few months after each of the kids, and the times that Andrew was deployed overseas, we’ve probably had sex an average of three times a week.”

JJ’s mouth fell open in surprise at Margie’s candor, and she found herself having to readjust her opinion of the woman (and of people in their forties in general).

“Oh good,” Barb grinned. “I can’t tell you what a relief it is to hear that.”

“When are you expecting?” Margie asked.

“Independence Day, or thereabouts.” Barb’s smile lit up her face. “I’m fifteen weeks pregnant this week, so I should be able to feel him move in a few weeks.”

“Oh, how wonderful.” Margie smiled, before turning to JJ. “Do you and Tony have any children?”

“No!” JJ answered, a little more vehemently than she’d intended to.

“They’ve only been dating a few months.” Barb explained.

“Four months next week.” JJ admitted. “So children are a while down the road for us.”

“Really?” Margie looked surprised. “Sorry, I had just presumed that you were married.”

JJ shook her head. “No, but we have decided to move in together.”
“You did?!” Barb straightened in obvious excitement. “When? Asher hasn’t said anything to me.”

“This morning actually.” JJ could feel her smile stretching her face. “We discussed it yesterday, but Tony sort of freaked a little. So I suggested that we revisit the topic in a month, but this morning he decided that he wanted to go ahead and do it now. We’re going to spend tomorrow moving my essentials into his flat, and we’ll worry about the rest of it next weekend.”

“Count us in.” Barb promised. “We don’t have any plans for tomorrow, and I’ve been dying to get a look at Tony’s apartment for years. Besides, you’ll probably want another man around to help Tony carry the furniture.”

“I don’t think we’ll be taking any of my furniture.” JJ admitted.


“Tony’s furniture is a lot nicer than mine,” JJ admitted, with an uncaring shrug. “And I don’t really have anything I’m attached to. We would have moved my bed, but this morning Tony bought a brand new king sized bed for us. We’ll be packing up my kitchen though. Tony doesn’t even own a single pot.”

“It is a mystery to me how that man has survived so long without a woman in his life.” Barb commented.

“Lots and lots of takeout.” JJ answered, with a grimace. “It’s a wonder he’s so fit.”

“Who’s fit?” Asher gasped between pants, as he dramatically collapsed onto the ground besides Barb.

“Not you.” Barb told him mercilessly. “You look like a tomato.”

“Tony’s on steroids.” Asher accused. “It’s the only explanation. A man of his age should not be able to run me into the ground.”
“It looks as though Andrew’s still going too.” JJ pointed out, as she watched Tony and Andrew competing for the ball on the court. “Isn’t he even older than Tony?”

“He’s a marine.” Asher said, as though it explained everything.

“And he runs four miles most days.” Margie added.

“Wow,” JJ was impressed. “I’ve started running regularly again this month, and I can barely manage one mile. And that’s with Tony there pushing me on.”

“You’re doing better than me.” Margie said. “I haven’t gone running with Andrew since before Rosie was born.”

“Asher and I have never run together.” Barb commented. “Our hatred for running was actually one of the things we bonded over on our first date.”

Asher groaned. “Not that I’ve got much of a choice now. Tony has put the whole team through a PT session every week this month, and running features much more heavily in it than it ought.”

“He probably wants the team to be able to catch a fleeing unsub.” JJ pointed out.

“Yeah,” Asher sighed dramatically. “Yeah, but between Francis who played pro-ball, Wardle who is recently out of the navy, and Tony, I end up looking terribly unfit. It’s not my fault that I sat behind a desk for a living before joining NCIS.”

“What did you do?” Margie asked curiously.

“I was a professional interviewer.” Asher answered. “My degrees are in psychology, so companies would hire me to help them interview for new staff.”

“I didn’t even know that professional interviewers existed.” JJ admitted. “What made you join NCIS?”
“I got bored.” Asher admitted, already starting to breathe easier. “It was just the same questions day after day, and I decided that I wanted to do something that would actually help society. Now I ask questions in an interrogation room.”

Barb elbowed Asher’s arm. “Guess what JJ was just telling us?”

“That someone was fit?”

“She and Tony are moving in together tomorrow.” Barb corrected excitedly. “I said that we’d help.”

“Seriously?” Asher looked surprised. “You’re moving in together already?”

JJ shrugged, trying not to feel too embarrassed. “We both wanted to, and it seemed silly to wait because other people would think it was too early.”

“Good on you.” Barb told her. “Every couple is different, and so moves at a different pace.”

“And it’s not as though you’re still in college.” Margie pointed out. “You’re both adults who know what you want.”

“Even if JJ is still in her twenties.” Asher teased. “Tony’s robbing the cradle a bit.”

“At least I don’t play ball like I’m in my fifties.” Tony retorted, as he and Andrew approached the group. Neither of them looked half as out of breath as Asher had been.

“It’s not fair,” Asher whined. “Andrew was a marine.”

“Five years ago.” Andrew put in, as he sat down and wrapped a sweaty arm around Barb. “I don’t think it can still be held against me.”

“Yeah, well now you work for Gibbs.” Asher shuddered. “Which is pretty much like being in the marines.”
Andrew’s expression darkened. “Gibbs’ team is nothing like marines.”

Tony settled down beside JJ so that their legs were touching. “No, I imagine not. How are you coping?”

Andrew suddenly looked tired. “I’m going to hold Stewart to his promise that it would only be a short term assignment. At this rate I’m going to get a repeated motion injury just from filling out forms reporting Gibbs’ regulation violations. The man is prolific!”

Tony sighed. “Yeah, sorry about that. You wouldn’t be in this position, if I’d had the nerve to do that four years ago.”

“I can handle it.” Andrew shrugged. “But that doesn’t mean that I want to.”

“I know the feeling.” Tony empathised. “How long did Stewart say that you’d be on Gibbs’ team?”

“He didn’t specify.” Andrew admitted. “Just that it was short term, and that he’d give me a team lead position here in DC when I was finished.”

“Huh,” Tony considered that. “I wonder whose job you’ll get.”
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a bit shorter than usual because I wanted to finish it in a specific place - sorry. Also, Happy Birthday to me! (I turned 27 a few days ago :D ).

“Hotch?” JJ knocked gently on the Lead Agent's open office door. “Do you have a minute.”

Hotch looked up from his desk, before setting aside the pen in his hand. “Yes, of course. Come in.”

“Thanks,” JJ resisted the urge to tug nervously at the blazer she was wearing. “How’s Jack?”

Hotch stern expression was replaced with a proud smile. “He smiled at us for the first time over the weekend.”

“Wow, I’m sure it really lit up his face.”

“It did.” Hotch agreed. “How can I help you? Is there a case?”

“No, nothing like that.” JJ answered quickly. She was really hoping that she would be able to spend a few more evenings with Tony before the team was called away for a case. “I just wanted to let you know that my personal circumstances have changed. I moved in with Tony over the weekend.”

Hotch looked faintly surprised. “Oh, congratulations.”

“Thank you.” JJ could feel her smile stretching her facial muscles. “I’ve also made Tony my emergency contact. I’ve filed all the appropriate forms with HR, but I wanted to let you know in person.”

“I appreciate that.”
JJ wasn’t really sure what else to say, so she stepped back towards the door. “I’ll see you later.”

“Yes,” Hotch picked up his pen. “Let me know if you come across any new cases.”

Leaving Hotch’s office, JJ picked up her lunch from her own office before walking to the BAU room where she knew Spencer, Derek, Elle, and Penelope would be waiting for her.

“What was that about?” Derek asked, as soon as JJ entered the room. “Do we have a new case?”

“Hotch asked me that too.” JJ acknowledged, with a smile. “No, no new case. I just had something I needed to tell him.”

Penelope’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of something? Anything you need to tell Hotch, you need to tell me too. I insist.”

JJ laughed. “I was planning on telling you anyway. I moved in with Tony.”

“Really?!” Penelope practically squealed in excitement. “When?”

“Yesterday.”

“Why am I only just hearing about this now?” Penelope asked disapprovingly. “We could have helped you move!”

“It all happened really fast.” JJ admitted, ignoring Elle’s sour expression. “We discussed it Friday night, decided to do it Saturday morning, and then moved yesterday. Two of Tony’s friends helped me move, but there wasn’t much to do. I’m donating all my furniture to the Salvation Army.”

“Really?” Elle asked disapprovingly. “Isn’t that a bit old fashioned?”

“His furniture is a lot nicer than mine.” JJ explained simply, refusing to let Elle’s attitude affect her mood. “I’ve had my coffee table since college, while his coffee table looks as though it’s been taken out of a catalogue. His whole apartment looks like a catalogue.”
Penelope’s eyes gleamed. “You have to invite us over. I want to see this apartment!”

“I’ll have you all over for dinner sometime soon.” JJ promised. “Right now, Tony and I are still getting used to living together.”

“Isn’t it a bit soon to have moved in with him?” Elle asked. “You’ve only known him for a couple of months, right?”

“Four months.”

“Yeah, but you said that he was away for most of that.” Elle pressed.

JJ frowned, she didn’t understand why Elle always felt the need to push. “We decided that we didn’t want to wait just because it was expected of us. We love each other. We get along really well. And we’ve already talked about the future. Why wait?”

“People can wear masks for years.” Elle answered, apparently oblivious to the rhetorical nature of the question. “He could be a serial killer for all you know, or a sexual predator.”

JJ scoffed. “I might have only known him for four months, but my cousin has known him for years. She was the one who set us up. There’s no way she would have done that if she thought that there was something off about him.”

“Besides,” Morgan added, before Elle could respond. “We’ve arrested unsubs who have managed to hide their perversions from their wives for decades. There’s no real way to be sure. Sometimes you just have to trust your gut and jump.”

“I disagree,” Elle frowned. “I would be able to to know for sure if I had been in a truly intimate relationship for at least a few years.”

“But how would you have a truly intimate relationship if you didn’t trust them?” JJ asked.
It felt strange to return to the normality of work after having made such a life changing decision over the weekend. Tony felt as though something ought to be different but, other than Asher’s occasional teasing, everything was exactly as it had been the week before. Right down to the daily questions he fielded from the other agents in the bullpen regarding their cases.

It had started a few days after Tony’s new team had solved their first case. Agent Steven Cramer, who led the Third MCRT, had approached Tony in the break room with a question about his fraud case. A few days after that, Agent Kara Roberts, the Team Lead for the Fourth MCRT, had met Tony in the elevator and had asked his advice on how best to secure a warrant for the burglary case she was working on.

Tony had answered both their questions as helpfully as he could, and now couldn’t go a day without having one agent or another asking for his input. It was completely bizarre, and Tony could hardly believe that him leaving Gibbs’ team had changed the bullpen’s dynamics so thoroughly.

As though summoned by his thoughts, Kara suddenly appeared in front of Tony’s desk. “Tony, quick question: how do I stop the FBI from taking over my case?”

“What’s the case?” Tony asked curiously.

“A pair of severed legs were found at Quantico.” Kara explained. “Ducky has the legs and Abby has the rest of the evidence, but now the FBI are ordering us to turn it all over to them. I don’t even know why they want it.”

“Why do you want it?”

Kara looked surprised. “It’s my case.”

It was all Tony could do not to roll his eyes. “Well, technically, it’s your victim’s case. What does it matter so works it, so long as it gets solved?”
Kara looked put out. “We can’t just let the FBI steal our cases.”

“Why not?”

“Because…” Kara paused with a frown. “Because then what would be the point of NCIS existing?”

“NCIS does a lot more than just solve crimes. It’s not like they’d put us completely out of business.” Tony pointed out. “Who is the agent requesting the evidence?”

“Agent Fornell.”

“Oh,” Tony winced, as a possible chain of events occurred to him. “So chances are that Gibbs called him in after Abby found something interesting in your evidence.”

Kara’s face reddened. “You think Abby would have told Gibbs the details about my case?”

“You don’t?”

Kara pursed her lips. “And you think Gibbs would have called the FBI? He hates it when they take over our cases.”

“He hates it when they take over his cases.” Tony corrected. “And he and Fornell are sort of friends. They share an ex-wife.”

“So what do I do?” Kara asked, glancing worriedly towards the elevator. “He said that he was on his way over.”

“Are you sure you want to fight for this case?” Tony asked. “It’s not like the FBI won’t solve it.”

Kara didn’t look impressed. “Where’s your agency pride?”
Tony sighed. “Alright, so you need to get Paul involved. This sort of thing can’t be fought ‘agent to agent’. It needs to be fought ‘director to director’.”

“And you think he’ll help?”

“Either that or he’ll tell you it’s not worth the fight and you’ll have to believe him.” Tony answered honestly. “He definitely needs to know about the possible information leak.”

“Oh, no.” Kara groaned, her attention on the elevator. “He’s already here.”

Without even bothering to look, Tony picked up his phone and quickly dialed Paul’s extension.

“You’ve reached Assistant Director Stewart’s office, you’re speaking with Juliet.”

“Hi, Juliet,” Tony said hurriedly. “This is Agent Dinozzo, from the Second Major Crime Response Team. Is Director Stewart in? There’s a situation unfolding in the bullpen.”

“Yes, Agent Dinozzo, I’ll put you through it him.”

Tony glanced towards the centre of the bullpen, expecting to Fornell talking to Gibbs, but was surprised to see the FBI agent sauntering towards him instead. Though it made sense when Tony considered that Kara was the agent whose case Fornell was here to steal.

“This is Assistant Director Stewart.” Paul answered, as Fornell stopped in front of Tony’s desk.

“Agent Dinutso.” Fornell drawled, looking sterner than usual. The agent with him crossed his arms in, what Tony could only presume was, an attempt to look intimidating.

“This is Tony Dinozzo.” Tony spoke into the phone, enjoying the way Fornell’s expression tightened as he was ignored. “We have a time sensitive situation here in the bullpen.”

“I’ll be right up.” Paul answered quickly.
Tony turned his attention to Fornell. “Agent Fornell. What an unpleasant surprise.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” Fornell narrowed his eyes at Tony. “I suppose you thought you’d get away with it?”

Tony glanced between the two FBI agents and Kara in confusion. “What?”

Kara stepped forward. “Agent Fornell? I’m Agent Roberts. We spoke on the phone. I’m not sure what makes you think you can sweep in and take my case, but…”

“We investigate all murder investigations involving federal agents.” Fornell’s partner interrupted aggressively.

“You think those legs belonged to a federal agent?” Kara asked, disbelievingly.

Tony’s stomach sunk, as his brain connected the dots. “No, they think a federal agent killed her.”

Fornell’s jaw jutted out. “You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you, Dinutso.”

“You can’t be serious!” Tony exclaimed, standing from his chair in frustration.

“Oh, we’re serious.” Fornell’s partner ground out.

“Let me guess, are you ‘dead serious?’” Tony snarked, before his brain could catch up with his mouth.

“You think now’s the time to make jokes?” Fornell glared.

Tony looked around the the bullpen, wishing that less people were watching the drama that was unfolding. His team were standing behind their desks, looking worried. Gibbs, McGee, Abby and David were all near the elevator looking both angry and vindicated, while Andrew was watching from beside Kara’s desk.
“I’m still struggling to believe that this isn’t a joke.” Tony admitted, turning his attention back to the FBI agents.

Fornell’s expression tightened. “Anthony Dinozzo, you are under arrest for the murder of the Jane Doe currently in NCIS autopsy…”

“What?!” Several agents exclaimed in disbelief.

“...You have the right to remain silent…”

“We haven’t even proven that there is a Jane Doe!” Kara protested. “All Ducky has is a pair of legs.”

“... Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law…”

Tony shook his head, wondering how his day had turned to crap so quickly. And to think, that this was supposed to be his first full day living with JJ.

“...You have the right to have an attorney. If you cannot afford one,...”

“What is going on here?!?” Paul’s authoritative voice rang across the bullpen, as he strode towards Tony’s desk.

“...one will be appointed to you by the court. Do you understand these rights as I have explained them to you?”

“I do.” Tony answered flatly.

“Agent Fornell,” Paul’s voice was quieter now, but no less authoritative. “What are you doing?”

“Agent Dinutso has been arrested for the murder of a Jane Doe.” Fornell’s partner answered.
Paul couldn’t have looked more stunned if he had tried. “What?”

“I didn’t do it, Paul.” Tony said quickly, though he didn’t put much hope in being believed.

Paul gave him a strange look. “Of course you didn’t, but don’t say anything until you have a lawyer present. Do you have one?”

“Not for this kind of thing.” Tony shook his head, he couldn’t believe this was happening. What would JJ think? She’d probably hear it on the FBI grapevine before he got a chance to talk to her about it. Would she believe that he hadn’t done it? “I need to make a phone call.”

Fornell was not looking impressed. “You can have your phone call once we get back to our offices.”

“He can have his phone call here.” Paul retorted. “Agent Fornell, you and your partner will go and wait by the elevator for Agent Dinozzo to join you.”

“Not a chance!” Fornell’s partner growled. “He’s in our custody.”

“You watch your tone.” Paul snapped. “Do you know who I am, Agent?”

“An NCIS agent?” Fornell’s partner answered sarcastically.

“I am the Assistant Director for Criminal Investigations.” Paul told him firmly. “You don’t want to pick a fight with me. Now go wait by the elevator. Agent Dinozzo will be along shortly.”

Tony watched as Fornell and his partner stomped their way back to the elevator, before turning his attention to the agents around him. “I have no idea what they’re talking about.”

“They don’t even know what they’re talking about.” Kara snapped. “This is my case, Paul. The last I heard, I’d delivered the evidence to Abby and Ducky and now the FBI are here with an arrest warrant. All I’ve got is a pair of legs and evidence from the scene.”
Paul frowned. “Nobody here believes that you murdered anyone, Tony. Sit down and call your girlfriend and a lawyer - in that order. Women don’t like hearing about these things second hand.”

Tony sat, and obediently pulled his phone out and dialed JJ’s number.

“Hey, Tony,” JJ answered, a smile in her voice.

“Hey,” Tony swallowed down the lump in his throat. “I need to tell you something.”

“What?” JJ asked worriedly.

“I’ve just been arrested by the FBI for murder.” Tony blurted out.

There was a stunned silence, before JJ replied. “What?”

“I didn’t do it.” Tony defended himself quickly.

“I know,” JJ answered, sounding irritated. “Who’s the arresting agent?”

“Tobias Fornell.”

“I don’t know him.” JJ admitted. “But if he’s arresting you for murder then he’s got to be an idiot.”

“Thank you.” Tony told her sincerely.

“For what?”

Tony sighed “Believing me.”
JJ made a dismissive noise. “Do you have a lawyer?”

“Not yet, that’s my next phone call.”

“Hotch will defend you.” JJ told him. “He was a prosecutor before he joined the FBI. Just a second.” There was a rustling sound, and then JJ’s voice became slightly muffled. “Hotch, an ‘Agent Fornell’ just arrested Tony for murder. Will you defend him?”

Tony could hear the muffled sound of man’s voice answering JJ, and he really hoped that Agent Hotchner was agreeing.

“Agent Dinozzo,” Agent Hotcher’s voice suddenly came through the phone. “This is Agent Hotcher. Where are you?”

“NCIS,” Tony said, glancing towards worriedly towards where Fornell and Gibbs were both glaring in his direction. “But they’ll be bringing me to your offices.”

“Very well.” Agent Hotchner answered. “I’ll meet you when you arrive here and will act as your representative during the questioning. What can you tell me about the case?”

“Not much.” Tony admitted. “A pair of legs were found at Quantico, and I’ve been arrested for the murder of the woman who used to be attached to them. It was originally an NCIS case, but the agent who was investigating it hasn’t seen any evidence that would lead to me.”

“I see,” Agent Hotchner didn’t sound impressed. “Don’t say anything to them, Agent Dinozzo, Don’t even make any small talk. I will see you when you arrive.”

25-25-25
Firstly, thank you all so much for your enthusiastic reception of the last chapter. I love reading all your comments - they really make my day!

Secondly, sorry this chapter is a little late. I'm a youth pastor for the Salvation Army and so spent the weekend (Thursday-Monday) at an Easter Camp seven hours drive from where I live. It was a long (but really, really awesome!) weekend, and I only got back at 8.30 last night at which point I pretty much collapsed straight into bed.

Thirdly, I hope you enjoy this chapter!

“You know you need to stay up here.” Hotch told JJ, as he handed her back the phone and turned to leave the office.

JJ frowned at Hotch’s back as she followed him out of his office, but didn’t bother arguing. There wasn’t any point. Not only was Hotch her boss, he was also right. A suspect’s girlfriend couldn’t push themselves in on the investigation, and her presence would probably just damage Hotch’s credibility as Tony’s legal representative.

“I know.” She acknowledged, as they they made their way down the stairs. “Just, look after him, Hotch. He didn’t do this.”

Hotch paused at the bottom of the stairs and gave her his full attention. “I know. I may have only met him once, JJ, but there is nothing about him that profiles anything close to a murderer. I’m not sure what’s going on, but I’ll sort it out. I promise.”

“Thank you.” JJ said, forcing as much genuine gratitude into the words as she could. “Let me know if we can do anything to help.”

“I will.”

JJ watched worriedly as Hotch strode towards the elevator. Her stomach felt as though it was tied in knots. How could something like this have happened? It took solid evidence to get an arrest warrant.
“What’s going on?” Morgan asked, sounding concerned.

JJ turned towards him, and saw that she had the attention of all the agents working in the room. “Tony’s just been arrested for murder. Hotch is going to act as his lawyer.”

“Seriously?” Morgan’s eyebrows rose. “He was arrested?”

“That’s what he said.” JJ worried her lip with her teeth. “He rang me a few minutes ago. He has no idea what’s going on.”

“Who arrested him?”

“An ‘Agent Fornell’.” JJ answered.

“Never heard of him.” Morgan admitted. “He’s one of us, I presume?”

“Yeah,” JJ swallowed passed the lump in her throat. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Drink some coffee.” Morgan suggested, before gently prodding her in the direction of the break room. “There’s nothing more you can do. Hotch will take care of it.”

“I don’t understand how this happened.” JJ admitted, as she allowed herself to be led. “Just this morning he was showing me his favourite jogging route. How could they have enough evidence to arrest him?”

Makes you think, doesn’t it?” Elle commented, as she followed them into the break room.

“About what?”

“About what we were talking about at lunch.” Elle answered, as though it should have been obvious. “How well do you really know him?”
Fury swelled up in JJ like a wave. “Are you kidding me?!”

“What?” Elle sounded offended.

“Look, Elle, I know that you’re all about proving yourself to be just as much of a dick as all the guys, but now really isn’t the time.” JJ snapped.

“Hey!” Morgan protested. “I’m not a dick.”

Elle pursed her lips. “I get that you’re upset, but you can’t talk to me like that. I’m a Supervisory Special Agent.”

“Yeah, and my boyfriend is currently in FBI custody for a murder he didn’t commit, so now really isn’t the time for your bitchy little comments.”

“You don’t know that he’s innocent.” Elle retorted.

JJ had never wanted to hit another woman so much in her life. “Yes, I do.”

“Elle, why don’t you just go back to your desk.” Morgan suggested, sounding frustrated. “You’re not helping.”

“Fine,” Elle narrowed her eyes at JJ. “But I’m writing her up for insubordination.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Morgan cautioned. “Because I’ll have no problem telling Hotch about how you baited a colleague during a time of personal crisis.”

Elle’s mouth dropped open in shock, before she turned and stalked out of the room.

“I’m so embarrassed.” JJ admitted, sinking into the nearest chair. “I can’t believe I lost my temper with her like that.”
“Don’t be,” Morgan shrugged, before pouring coffee into two mugs. “I’m impressed that you managed to hold out for this long.”

“Eh,” JJ shook her head. “It’s nothing new. They’re all like that.”

Morgan frowned. “All who?”

“All the agents who fill Elle’s position.” JJ explained. “Penelope and I agree. They’re all the same. Elle’s no worse than any of the others.”

“Why?”

“Well, they’re used to being the big fish in a small pond, but then they come here and they’re suddenly the small fish. You, Spencer, Hotch and Gideon are all more qualified and more experienced than they are, but Penelope and I aren’t. Which means that the only time they get to feel like a big fish is when they interact with us.”

Morgan handed her a coffee, his eyes wide with surprise. “Why aren’t you a profiler again?”

“Because I’m not remotely qualified or experienced.” JJ reminded him.

“I’ll give you not experienced,” Morgan admitted. “But I’m pretty sure journalism is all about profiling.”

JJ shrugged, he wasn’t wrong. “And I don’t want to spend my day getting into unsub’s heads. It’s bad enough hearing about their crimes.”

“Well, if you change your mind…” Morgan offered, leaving the sentence open.

“Unlikely, but thank you.” JJ smiled, before sipping at her coffee. “I’m pretty happy with having a job that doesn’t involve being shot at.”

“That’s fair,” Morgan grinned. “You and Tony planning on having children?”
“Yes, we talked about it on our second date actually.” JJ grinned at the memory. “I told him that I wanted three, and he didn’t disagree. We should probably have another conversation about it thought.”

“You should start soon, or people will mistake Tony for their grandfather.” Morgan smirked.

JJ rolled his eyes. “He’s not even forty.”

“What’s it like, dating someone that much older than you?” Morgan asked curiously.

“Most of the time I don’t even notice it.” JJ admitted. “Except then I remember all the things he’s managed to do with his life. By the time I finished my undergraduate degree, he’d already had a double major, a masters, and had worked undercover for two years. Also, we had dinner with some friends of his the other day, and one of the couples has a daughter in college.”

“Wow,” Morgan chuckled. “That must have been weird.”

“Oh, yeah,” JJ agreed. “But then, she’s pretty much the coolest woman in her forties I’ve ever met. She’s married to the agent who’s taken over Tony’s position as Agent Gibbs second in command.”

“I’ve been asking around about him.” Morgan admitted.

“Who? Gibbs or Tony?”

“Both,” Morgan grimaced. “Everyone says that Gibbs is an ass who should have been forced out of his job years ago. By the sound of it, he’s done more to damage inter-agency cooperation involving NCIS than every other agent combined.”

“Tony’s in therapy because of the damage Gibbs did to him.” JJ admitted, before feeling guilty for betraying his confidence. “But don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t.” Morgan promised. “Abusive bosses can do a lot of harm.”
“I’ve never had one.” JJ admitted. “Hearing some of Tony’s stories just make me all the more thankful for Hotch.”

“He is pretty great.” Morgan agreed. “Much better than Gideon.”

JJ shook her head. “I’d only been working with the team for six months when he went on medical leave so I hadn’t really noticed much. What was wrong with him?”

“He’s not a team player.” Morgan answered simply. “Which is a problem when you’re the one responsible for leading the team.”

“Yeah,” JJ sighed. “What have you heard about Tony?”

“That if he doesn’t make it into the Director’s chair in the next ten years it won’t be because no one tried to make it happen.”

“Really?” JJ’s eyes widened. “I had no idea.”

“Rumour has it that he’s being groomed to be made Assistant Director by the end of the year.”

JJ considered that for a moment. “Wow, yeah, I can see that. The current Assistant Director for Criminal Investigations has really taken him under his wing, and I’m pretty sure Tony told me that he’ll be retiring later this year.”

“It explains why they sent him off on that boat so suddenly.” Morgan commented.

“Ship.” JJ corrected.

Morgan laughed. “Look at you, a good, little navy wife.”

JJ rolled her eyes. “We’ve only been dating four months, Morgan. He hasn’t even met my parents
After the FBI agents’ first few failed attempts at luring Tony into conversation, the car ride to the Hoover Building was thankfully silent. It was relief since Tony could use the time to try and process the events of the last half an hour.

What could Abby and Ducky have found in the evidence Kara had submitted that had landed him in the back of an FBI SUV? He had no memory of having come into contact with a pair of amputated legs, and he hadn’t touched a woman other than JJ in more than six months. What was going on?

Tony still hadn’t come to any kind of conclusion when Fornell finally parked the SUV under the Hoover Building, but he was glad to see Agent Hotchner waiting for them.

Fornell’s partner hopped out first, and then practically dragged Tony out of car. It was all Tony could do not to fall on his face - balancing was a lot harder with his wrists cuffed behind him. Fornell’s partner sniggered as Tony stumbled forward, but his laughter was quickly cut off when Hotchner approached them.

“Are you alright, Agent Dinozzo?”

Tony stood up straight and met Hotchner’s gaze. “Yes, thank you, Agent Hotchner.”

“Agent Hotchner?” Fornell’s partner repeated, sounding surprised. “From the BAU?”

“Yes,” Hotchner answered forbiddingly. “And you are?”

“Agent Sacks, sir, and this is Agent Fornell.”

Hotchner didn’t look impressed, but he nodded briefly in Fornell’s direction.

Fornell frowned. “How can we assist the BAU today, Agent Hotchner?”
“I’m not here on behalf of the BAU,” Hotchner corrected. “I have agreed to act as Agent Dinozzo’s representation for the time being. I trust that you have read Agent Dinozzo his rights?”

“Of course we have.” Sacks looked put out.

“Not properly,” Tony corrected. “They didn’t ask me whether, understanding my rights, I was willing to speak to them without a lawyer present.”

Sacks glared at him. “That’s because we hadn’t gotten you to interrogation yet!”

“Then what do you call all those attempts at interrogating me in the car?” Tony asked.

Fornell cleared his throat. “So you’re waving your rights to an attorney, Dinutso?”

“My client’s name is Agent Anthony Dinozzo.” Hotchner said firmly. “You will treat him with respect.”

“He killed a woman and cut off her legs!” Sacks exclaimed.

“So you claim, but I’ve yet to hear of any actual evidence to support that.” Hotchner answered.

“You might not have, but a judge has.” Fornell retorted, before turning his attention back to Tony. “Well?”

“Agent Hotchner is acting as my attorney.” Tony explained slowly.

“Agent Hotchner is an FBI Agent, not an attorney.”

“I was a state prosecutor before I joined the FBI and I have retained my license.” Hotchner explained shortly. “Shall we move this inside, gentlemen?”
The FBI interrogation room that Tony was led into was pretty much the same as the ones at NCIS. Though, Tony thought that maybe the walls were a different colour. He couldn’t be sure, since he’d never really paid attention to those details before.

It felt strange to be sitting facing the double-sided mirror, and Tony was pretty sure that Agent Hotchner’s presence beside him was the only thing preventing him from completely freaking out. His arrest felt so real now that he was sitting in an interrogation room with his hands cuffed behind his back.

“Uncuff him.” Agent Hotchner ordered, as soon as they had all taken a seat.

Fornell sneered. “I know you’re used to getting your own way, Agent Hotchner, but this is my interrogation and I will uncuff my murder suspect when I want to.”

“You and your partner are fast working your way towards a police brutality charge, Fornell.” Hotchner warned. “I saw the way Agent Sacks shoved Agent Dinozzo out of the vehicle.”

Fornell’s expression tightened. “Uncuff him.” He snapped at Sacks.

It was a relief to be able to move his arms again, and Tony took some time to examine the red marks the cuffs had left on his wrists. He wasn’t sure if Hotchner was serious about the police brutality charge but, if he was, Tony wanted to do everything he could to help.

“Anytime you’re ready, Agent Fornell.” Hotchner prompted dryly.

Fornell’s jaw jutted out in anger. “Dinutso…”

“It’s Agent Dinozzo, Agent Fornell.” Hotchner corrected. “I won’t warn you again.”

Fornell’s face was growing redder by the minute. “Agent Dinozzo, can you verify your whereabouts over the last seventy two hours?”
Tony’s shoulders slumped in relief. “Yes.”

Sacks and Fornell both looked surprised. “Really?”

Tony offered them both a smirk. “I spent most of Friday in the NCIS bullpen writing up the paperwork of my team’s last case. Then I spent an hour with my therapist.”

“You’re seeing a therapist?”

“It was requested of me by the Assistant Director for Criminal Investigations,” Tony explained. “It turns out that working for an abusive bastard like Gibbs can do some damage to a person’s psyche.”

Fornell’s expression hardened. “And where is this therapist you’re seeing?”

“Right now?” Tony asked. “I have no idea, but on Friday afternoon we met in the NCIS Building.”

“Then what?” Fornell ground out.

“Then I left NCIS and, after a short verbal altercation with Agent McGee, drove straight to my girlfriend’s apartment. I spent the entire weekend with her, and only said goodbye to her this morning.”

Fornell and Sacks were both looking distinctly put out. “And who is this girlfriend of yours?”

“FBI Special Agent Jennifer Jareau,” Tony answered smoothly. “She’s the Media Liaison to the FBI’s Behavioural Analysis Team.”

“I see.” Fornell glanced towards Hotchner. “And you’re seriously telling me that you haven’t spent a minute apart since Friday evening?”

“Well, we did move in together yesterday.” Tony really hoped that JJ had already told Hotchner about that. “And while we were moving, NCIS Special Agent Balboa and I drove a load of her boxes to my apartment while JJ and Agent Balboa’s wife packed the rest of her belongings.”
“So you’ve spent the last seventy two hours in the company of federal agents.” Fornell summed up. “That seems very convenient.”

“It isn’t unusual for federal agents to spend the majority of their time with other agents.” Hotchner answered for Tony. “Do you have anything else, Agent Fornell?”

Fornell leaned back in his chair. “Can you think of anyone who would want to frame you, Agent Dinozzo?”

“Huh?” Tony asked, surprised by Fornell’s change of tone.

“The legs that Agent Robert’s team found were imbedded with your bite mark.” Fornell stated. “There was also the tip of a glove with your fingerprint on it found at the crime scene. If you didn’t do it, then someone went out of their way to make it look like you did.”

“You arrested me off a bite mark and a tip of a glove?” Tony asked, outrage swelling within him. “Bite mark analysis is notoriously unreliable, and what did you think I did? Accidentally cut off the tip of my glove while trying to cover up a crime? I could sue you for this!”

“We also have written statements from your co-workers claimings that you have become increasingly aggressive and vindictive.” Sacks defended. “What do you think it says about you that we couldn’t find one character witness who refused to believe that you were guilty?”

“I think it says that you didn’t look very hard.” Tony retorted, leaning back and crossing his arms. “There are plenty of people at NCIS who can hardly believe what just happened. The fact that you only asked the opinion of the four people in the agency who would disagree doesn’t make me think very highly of you, Agent Sacks.”

“I’ve only met Agent Dinozzo once and I could have told you that he was undeniably innocent of the crime you are accusing him of.” Hotchner put in. “Have you even identified the victim yet?”

“No, Abby has been unable to match the victims DNA to the database.” Fornell was looking uncomfortable.
Hotch frowned. “Abby?”

“The NCIS forensic tech.” Fornell explained.

“So you haven’t even verified that there is a victim?” Hotchner asked in disbelief.

“We’ve got a pair of legs!” Sacks defended.

“Yeah, but didn’t you ever wonder where the rest of the body was?” Tony asked. “If I was going to frame someone, which I wouldn’t,” He inserted quickly with hard glance towards Fornell. “But if I was going to, I wouldn’t kill anyone. That would leave too many variables.”

“So where would you get the legs?” Fornell asked.

Hotchner cleared his throat. “Do not answer that.”

Fornell let out a frustrated sigh. “Theoretically, where would you get the legs?”

“From a morgue.” Tony answered. “Or a funeral home.”

“Which brings me back to my earlier question, Dinu...Dinozzo.” Fornell said. “Can you think of anyone who would want to frame you?”

“Right now, off the top of my head?” Tony asked. “Gibbs, Abby, McGee, Officer David.”

Fornell glared at him. “Be serious.”

“I am being serious!” Tony exclaimed, leaning forward. “I don’t think you understand just how much crap Gibbs has landed you in here. Yes, you had jurisdiction over this case, but the notification ought to have come from Agent Roberts or Assistant Director Stewart. Instead, Abby told Gibbs, and Gibbs told you. Am I right?”
“Yes.” Fornell admitted grudgingly.

“Abby is currently on probation for refusing to process evidence submitted by my team.” Tony told him flatly. “She has been verbally abusive to me on multiple occasions, most of which were automatically recorded and then reviewed by our HR Department. She is one step away from being fired because of her inappropriate behaviour towards me. Agent McGee has just received transfer orders to the San Diego Office because Agent Gibbs was deemed an unfit training agent for him. And right in the midst of that, I’ve just been framed with murder all the evidence for which has come through Abby and Gibbs.”

Fornell’s mouth dropped open. “We didn’t know any of that.”

“No,” Tony agreed. “Because instead of following procedure and approaching Assistant Director Stewart, you came in and arrested me with a truly embarrassing lack of evidence.”

Fornell was looking pale. “I see.”

“Good.” Tony snapped, before taking a deep breath. “You also may want to look into the Macaluso family, Lieutenant Pam Kim, George Stewart, and Danny Price.”

“The Macaluso family?” Fornell repeated slowly.

Tony smirked at him. “Ever heard of Tony Macaluso, Fornell?”

“Yeah, he disappeared after…” Fornell trailed off. “Oh.”

“I presume that you will be dropping all charges against Agent Dinozzo?” Hotchner asked flatly.

“We still haven’t verified his alibi.” Sacks protested.

Fornell turned to Hotchner. “I presume that you’ll confirm the alibi with Agent Jareau, Agent Hotchner?”
“Of course.”

“Then, yes,” Fornell sighed, “We’re dropping all charges.”
Chapter 27

Tony stalked out the interrogation room feeling absolutely furious. He didn’t honestly believe that his old team had been the ones to frame him for murder - Gibbs’ personal ethics wouldn’t allow him to stoop that far - but how dare they slander him so badly that it could be used against him by the FBI?!

And the worst part of it was that he doubted that they would see it as slander. Chances were that McGee, Abby and Gibbs believed every slanderous word that they had written in their statements. Which was just ridiculous. How had their petty frustration that he had left the team gotten this out of hand?

Stopping at the elevator doors, Tony jabbed forcefully at the ‘up’ button before looking around to see if Agent Hotchner had followed him.

“What floor does the BAU work out of?”

“Nine.” Hotchner answered, his gaze assessing. “Are you alright?”

“I’m angry. I never thought my old team would go this far.”

“You think they did it on purpose?”

“Do I think they framed me? No. But I think they gave those statements knowing exactly what Fornell would be able to do with them.”

Hotchner frowned. “Were you serious about suing the FBI?”

“Do I have a case?”

“Yes.”

Tony strode into the elevator and leaned against the back wall, as Hotchner followed him in. “I don’t think so. It wouldn’t be worth it. I’ll try and express my frustration though the official inter-agency
“To what end?” Hotchner asked, pressing the button for the ninth floor.

“There are too many cowboys running around the federal agencies.” Tony answered flatly.
“Someone needs to remind them that we have laws and regulations for a reason.”

“You’re talking about Agent Gibbs.”

“And Agent Fornell.” Tony added. “And I can’t imagine that they’re the only two running around and causing havoc. They’re just the two trying to ruin my life.”

Hotchner looked him towards him. “I wouldn’t have profiled you as being someone who relied heavily on the rules. It’s not a common trait for people who are as skilled in undercover work as you are.”

“I spent my final year of school at a Military Academy.” Tony offered. “And the last partner I had as a detective was dirty. Between that and watching criminal after criminal walk away unconvicted because Gibbs thought that he was above the rules, well, let’s just say that I’ve learnt that the rules are there to protect people.”

“So you don’t find the rules to be frustrating when they stop you from following a lead?”

“If I can’t solve a case while following regulations then clearly I’m just not that good.” Tony answered flatly.

“That’s not a common perspective among law enforcement.” Hotchner commented, as the elevator doors opened to reveal a well-lit entrance area and a glass wall.

“I can’t imagine that you think any differently if you used to be a state prosecutor.” Tony followed Hotchner towards the glass doors in front of them.

Despite being smaller, the BAU’s workspace was undeniably similar to the NCIS bullpen and Tony couldn’t help but smile when he saw the stairs leading up to a series of offices. It was as though the
same architect had designed both buildings. He wondered if the CIA had a similar layout too.

There was no sign of JJ though, and Tony glanced questioningly toward the two agents that he did recognise. “Where would I find JJ?”

“I’ll get her.” Reid offered, quickly stand up and moving towards the stairs.

“That was quick.” Greenaway commented with an edge to her tone.

Tony glanced towards her quizzically. “What was?”

“Your interrogation.” Greenaway’s smile was sharp. “JJ said that you were arrested.”

“All charges have been dropped.” Agent Hotchner answered, as Tony watched Reid pause at an open door near the stairs.

Secondly later, JJ appeared at the doorway with a relieved expression and began quickly walking towards them.

“What happened?” Greenaway asked.

Tony ignored her in favour of meeting JJ halfway. He wrapped his arms around her and breathed in the scent of her hair, feeling the tension that he’d been carrying since Fornell had arrived at NCIS draining away.

“What happened?” JJ asked, after a few seconds.

“I have an alibi.” Tony answered, kissing the top of her head. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

JJ’s relieved exhale was audible. “Oh, thank god.”
“What made them think it was you?” Morgan asked curiously.

“My bite mark was found on the victim and my fingerprint was found near the crime scene.”

“That’s it?”

Tony appreciated the other man’s incredulity. “That, and some slanderous statements from my old team. They haven’t dealt with my promotion well.”

JJ pulled away. “Gibbs did this?”

“Well, I doubt he framed me.” Tony shrugged. “But, yeah.”

“That bastard!” JJ snapped, her cheeks reddening. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to go back to NCIS and have a conversation with Paul.” Tony hoped he didn’t sound quite as vengeful as he felt.

“I’ll give you a ride.” JJ offered, slipping her hand into Tony’s.

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It was a ten minute drive from the FBI building to the Navy Yard, and by the time JJ dropped him off outside NCIS Tony was feeling just as angry about the situation as he had been when he’d left the interrogation room. The fact that JJ was furious on his behalf really wasn’t helping him to calm down at all.

Tony strode into the building, and then took the elevator straight to floor that Paul worked from. Judging by the look of surprise on Paul’s secretary’s face the news of his arrest had made its way through the organisation.

“Is he in?” Tony asked, brusquely.
“Yes, sir.” Juliet fumbled for her phone. “Agent Dinozzo is here to see you, sir.” There was a pause, before she lowered the phone. “You can go in.”

“Thank you,” Tony offered an apologetic smile, before striding into the office.

“I heard they dropped all charges.” Paul commented, from behind his desk.

“I have an alibi.” Tony explained, sitting in his usual chair. “Did you hear why they arrested me?”

“Yes,” Paul’s jaw was set. “I’ve spoken to my counterpart at the FBI, and the agents who arrested you will be facing internal enquiries.”

Tony nodded stiffly. “And the NCIS agents involved?”

Paul sighed, suddenly looking older than Tony had ever seen him. “What do you think should happen to them?”

“I can’t imagine that firing Gibbs is an option.” Tony gritted his teeth. “He’s got too many connections. I don’t know. Can you suspend him?”

“The director is not willing to make any disciplinary actions towards Gibbs at this time.” Paul looked just as frustrated as Tony felt.

“So he’s just going to get away with it?” Tony asked. “He leaked confidential information to another agency!”

“The director is choosing to focus on the fact that that information would have been passed onto that agency through the proper channels anyway.”

“That’s bull.” Tony snapped. “If the information had been passed through you then Gibbs, McGee and Abby wouldn’t have had the opportunity to submit those slanderous statements about me.”
Paul’s expression didn’t disagree. “Nonetheless, that is the director’s decision.”

“Almost makes me appreciate rule twelve.” Tony muttered.

“Rule twelve?”

“Never date a coworker.” Tony explained. “It’s one of Gibbs’ rules.”

“I’ve heard of his rules.” Paul admitted, with a small frown. “Are you insinuating that Gibbs and the director are dating?”

“Not currently,” Tony admitted. “But they definitely have some history.”

“I see,” Paul was still frowning. “And what would your recommendation be regarding consequences for Agent McGee.”

Tony sighed. “As far as I’m aware McGee’s only involvement was the statement he wrote, and I highly doubt that he wrote anything that he didn’t believe.”

“You’re too soft on that boy.” Paul commented. “He slandered you in an official statement.”

“I don’t think that it counts as slander if he believed it.” Tony pointed out. “But I am concerned that his opinion of me has twisted so completely that he believes me capable of murder.”

“I would have fired him a month ago if you hadn’t stopped me.”

Tony looked across at him in surprise. “Really?”

“He’s a probationary agent who has no respect for his superiors or the job that we do.”

“A lack of respect that he was taught by Gibbs.”
Paul grimaced. “You’ve made this argument before.”

“I think McGee needs to see a shrink.” Tony told him. “I was already an experienced law enforcement agent when I started working with Gibbs and he still managed to mess me up enough that you ordered me to see Elton. You should do the same for McGee when he moves to San Diego next week.”

“So instead of firing Gibbs, you want me to pay for him to see a psychologist?”

“He got messed up on our watch.” Tony argued stubbornly. “We have a responsibility to fix him.”

Paul shook his head. “That boy does not deserve your protection.”

“By that logic, neither do half of our victims.” Tony pointed out. “It doesn’t stop up from doing what we can to protect them.”

“You’re a good man, Tony.” Paul sighed. “And what do you want me to do with Abby.”

“I don’t think you have any choice except to fire her.” Tony answered, his stomach twisting guiltily.

Paul’s jaw dropped in surprise. “Really?”

“She’s already been placed on probation.” Tony pointed out. “And she withheld information from Kara while giving that information to Gibbs. She was playing favourites again, and doing it in a way that would get the outcome that she wanted. If you just lengthen her probation, she’ll realise that she can get away with anything. Not to mention that it’ll lower morale in the bullpen.”

Paul studied Tony silently for a few seconds. “Why does McGee deserve your protection and Abby doesn’t?”

Tony frowned as he sorted through his thoughts. “Because Abby is older and more experienced than McGee. She isn’t a probationary tech, she’s been working here for seven years and worked in a lab
for a few years before that. Not to mention that her position means that her behaviour could call into question every piece of evidence that she has processed in the last seven years.”

“And you aren’t concerned that firing her will leave us open for exactly that?”

“She hasn’t made any mistakes in her analysis that we’re aware of. We’re just concerned that she doesn’t understand workplace boundaries and NCIS regulations. Neither of those things are grounds for a retrial. But if we don’t act now then who knows what will happen in the future. Besides, it would provide you with the opportunity to revamp the protocols for the Forensic Lab.”

Paul’s eyes looked thoughtful. “You think that’s needed?”

“There’s nothing specific that I can tell you without creating the exact problem we’ve been talking about.” Tony said carefully. “But yes.”

“How many weeks of therapy have you had now, Tony?”

“Three.”

“And it’s already made this much of a difference to your confidence?” Paul shook his head in amazement. “I hope you’re planning on continuing after the four weeks.”

“It’s not just therapy,” Tony admitted, leaning back in his chair. “Fury brings out my assertive nature. And I’m considering it. Would I still be able to see Elton?”

Paul looked pleased. “Yes, of course.”

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Tony strode out of the elevator and into the bullpen without sparing a glance towards his old team. He didn’t care what they thought of his return. Well, at least, he was trying really hard to get to point where he didn’t care. Besides, he doubted that his old team’s reactions to his return would be as encouraging as the expressions of relief that he was seeing from the other agents in the room.
Making his way towards his desk, Tony was amused to note that none of his new team had noticed his entrance. Their attention was firmly fixed on the small campfire discussion they seemed to be holding.

“Welcome back, Tony!” Steven, the Team Lead for the fourth MCRT, called as Tony walked past him.

“Thanks.” Tony nodded in acknowledgement, but didn’t stop to chat. He wanted to talk to his team.

Steven’s words must have carried across the bullpen because when Tony looked back to his team he saw that they were all on their feet and moving towards him.

“Tony!” Asher’s relief was audible. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” Tony assured, with a slightly forced smile. “All charges were dropped.”

“That was quick.” Francis commented.

“I had an alibi.” Tony explained simply. “Agent Fornell didn’t do his homework properly.”

Asher nodded. “They called me a while ago to confirm that you were with me yesterday.”

“They checked in with JJ too.” Tony told him. “They can’t have managed to narrow down the time of death yet. They wanted to know my whereabouts for the last seventy two hours.”

Francis blanched. “That long? I wouldn’t be able to give that sort of alibi.”

“Thankfully I spent the weekend with JJ, so I was covered.” Tony said, beginning to lead his team back to their work area.

“Did you find out why they thought it was you?” Asher asked.
“It looks as though someone is trying to frame me.” Tony answered, with a frown. “I’ve given the FBI a few names to look into.”

Asher frowned a bit incredulously. “And you’re just going to trust them with it?”

“It’s their case.” Tony pointed out. “And if it wasn’t, it would be Kara’s case. We have our own case to work on.”

“But don’t you want to find out whose is framing you?” Francis asked, looking just as surprised as Asher.

Tony sighed. “What do we tell victims who want to get involved in the case?”

“That they should trust us to do our job.” Wardle answered clearly.

“Right,” Tony agreed. “So I’m trusting the FBI to do their job, while I focus on doing my job. Have you guys found anything new?”

“No,” Asher admitted. “We’ve been working with Agent Robert’s team to try and prove that you were innocent.”

Tony glanced over at where Kara’s team were working from, a warm feeling flooding through him. He didn’t know what he had done to earn such loyalty from his team, let alone from the agents who worked across the bullpen.

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As it turned out, Tony’s hope for a productive last few hours of work was a little too ambitious. Not only was he finding it hard to concentrate on anything aside from the fact that someone had tried to frame him for murder, but it seemed as though every single agent in the bullpen wanted to assure him that they had never believed him capable of murder.
Well, every agent except for three notable exceptions. Gibbs, McGee, and Officer David didn’t even cross onto Tony’s half of the bullpen and, if it hadn’t been the for the barriers that blocked them from Tony’s sight, he was sure they would have probably spent the afternoon glaring at him. But maybe that was just Tony being petty.

Then, as though that wasn’t distracting enough, Gibbs received a call that had him growling into his phone and storming up the stairs to the director’s office, and Tony found himself unable to concentrate for a whole other reason. He couldn’t believe that he had advocated for Abby to be fired. She had been his friend for more than four years, how could he have turned his back on her so easily? He should have fought for her just as strongly as he had fought for McGee - not suggested that she be fired from her dream job.

Maybe Gibbs, McGee and Abby were right to think that he had changed for the worse. The old Tony would have been storming up the stairs to save Abby along with Gibbs, not sitting in his chair knowing that he was the reason it was happening. No wonder his old team had believed the evidence that told them that he was a murderer. If he was willing to sabotage his friend’s career, what else would he be willing to do?

Except, there was a niggling doubt in the back of his head suggesting that it was a bit more complicated than that. He hadn’t been the one of end his friendship with Abby, she’d done that all by herself. Not to mention all the nasty, horrible comments that she’d made to him over the last few months. It wasn’t as though he was betraying a friend, just a colleague.

Besides, could he really be accused of sabotaging Abby’s career when she had been the one to break regulations over and over again? And he wasn’t just talking about the regulations she had broken in the last four months as she lashed out at him for leaving. Abby had been breaking forensic regulations for as long as he had known her. It was frankly a miracle that none of their cases had been thrown out because someone had found out that she put her caf-pows in the evidence freezer.

Tony had gotten someone fired for corrupting evidence before and, while he’d felt a little guilty, he’d known that it had been the right thing to do. The job they did was too important to let incompetency let murderers go free. If he hadn’t let himself be so blinded by his friendship with Abby, Tony probably would have made a complaint against her a long time ago. So he shouldn’t feel too guilty, right? He was only trying to do what was right.

The sound of a phone ringing jerked Tony out of his thoughts, and he quickly lifted the receiver to his ear. “You’ve reached Special Agent Dinozzo.”

“This is Charles Stirling, Miss Scuito’s assistant. We have some results from the evidence you submitted.”
“Oh, great.” Tony grabbed a pen and paper to take notes. “Shoot.”

“Uh,” Charles paused. “It would probably be easier if you came down to the lab.”

Tony winced. He hadn’t been down to Abby’s lab since before he’d left Gibbs’ team, and today was the last day that he wanted to break that streak. What if he saw her? What if she cried?

“Are you sure you can’t just give it to me over the phone?”

“Sorry, sir, but I really think you ought to see this in person.”

Tony sighed. “Alright, I’ll be down in a few minutes.”
Chapter 28

It didn’t take long for Tony to deduce that his summons to the Abby’s lab was almost definitely a trap. After all, what kind of results could Abby and Charles have found that would require him to see them in person? No, chances were that Abby had figured out that Tony was responsible for her being fired and so had decided to get him alone so that she could yell at him. Which was understandable really and, since Tony had some yelling of his own that he wanted to do, he had decided to along with it.

Though, as Tony approached the open door to Abby’s lab, he couldn’t help but wish that he’d brought Asher down with him. His stomach felt like a swirling pool of dread. What if she locked down her lab with him in it? He really didn’t want to be trapped alone in a room with Abby for an undetermined amount of time.

Pausing just out of the sight of the glass doors, Tony took a deep breath and tried to calm himself down. It didn’t matter if Abby yelled at him. She wasn’t his friend, and he hadn’t done anything wrong. Anything she said would just roll off him. Like water off a duck’s back. He could do this.

There was no sign of either Abby or Charles when Tony stepped through the door, but it didn’t take him long to find them. Or at least, it didn’t take him long to notice the gun that Charles Stirling was pointing at him.

Tony’s hand moved automatically to his gun holster, before he remembered that he’d left his gun in his desk drawer.

“Uh, uh, uh.” Charles tuttered, his expression manic. “Hands in the air, Agent Dinozzo, or I’ll shoot.”

Quite frankly, Tony doubted that Charles would be able to shoot the side of a barn given the way the gun was shaking in his hand, but that wasn’t something he wanted to test just yet.

“Where’s Abby?” Tony asked, looking around the room.

“In her office.” Charles’ mouth curled into a smirk. “Don’t worry, she won’t be disturbing us.”

Tony glanced towards the glass wall that looked into Abby’s office, but couldn’t see any sign of her.
It didn’t matter. The way he saw it, Abby was either unconscious, tied up, dead, or just didn’t care that her assistant was threatening Tony with a gun. Personally, Tony was hoping that it was one of the first two options.

Looking back at Charles, Tony considered how long it would take him to tackle the man to the ground. They were only standing about six feet apart, which meant that Tony would need to take at least one step before diving at the other man. The problem was that the closer Tony got to Charles, the more likely he was to be hit by a bullet.

“You don’t even know who I am, do you?” Charles accused.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Well, my first guess is going to have to be Charles Stirling, Abby’s Forensic Assistant.”

Charles sneered. “You got me fired!!”

“You know, that was actually what I was expecting hear when I came down here.” Tony admitted. “Not from you though.”

“And I bet you thought you’d gotten away with it!”

“I don’t think we’re communicating on the same wavelength here, Charles.”

“You and that idiot George Stewart.”

Tony frowned in confusion. “The forensic technician in Baltimore?”

“Well, you’re paying for it now, aren’t you?!” Charles snapped, and Tony almost expected to see foam coming from the man’s mouth.

“I’m paying for something.” Tony acknowledged, watching the shaking gun nervously. “Though you still haven’t explained what exactly I’m supposed to paying for.”
“You got me fired!” Charles snarled.

“Right,” Tony agreed. “There seems to be a lot of that going around at the moment. Where exactly did I get you fired from?”

“Pemberton Medical Analysis.”

“Right, and how exactly did I get you fired?”

“Not that bright, are you, Dinozzo?” Charles asked sarcastically.

“I have my moments.” Tony defended. “But I’m pretty sure I haven’t had anything to do Pemberton Medical Analysis.”

“So you didn’t report the tainted evidence then?”

“I reported George Stewart.” Tony admittedly slowly.

“You ruined the man’s career!” Charles accused. “And then he turned around and ruined mine!”

Tony was starting to make the connections. “Because you were the one who tainted the evidence.”

“Ding, ding, ding. He finally gets it.”

“Have you seriously been working at NCIS for three months just so that you could attack me?” Tony asked in disbelief.

“This wasn’t the original plan.” Charles admitted, sounding almost disappointed. “My first plan was perfect!”

“People with perfect plans, don’t usually need to move on to plan b.” Tony pointed out.
“How was I supposed to know that you’d have an alibi?!”

“You framed me.” Tony realised, feeling like the slowest investigator in the world.

“And I would have gotten you good too!”

Tony winced. “Yeah, probably. Wait, I only got released a few hours ago. Where did you get a gun?”

Charles smirked manically. “Agent McGee lent me his one.”

Tony glanced towards Abby’s office again, he really hoped that McGee and Abby were both alright. “So, what’s your plan? You know that you’ll never get away with this. You’ve assaulted a federal agent and a federal employee. They’re going to lock you up and throw away the key.”

Charles readjusted his grip on the gun. “I guess that means I’ve got nothing left to lose.”

“That’s one way of looking at it.” Tony admitted, watching Charles carefully. “But if you kill me they’ll charge you with first degree murder of a federal agent. You’ll spend the rest of your life on death row.”

Charles’ eyes gleamed. “But I will have gotten my revenge!”

Tony sighed, he hated trying negotiate with crazy people. It hardly ever worked. He was going to have to someone get the gun off Charles without getting himself shot. He’d throw something, but he doubted he’d have time to pick something up and throw it before Charles fired. Which really just left charging at the man.

In one, two, three…

Tony took a step forward before launching himself at Charles and reaching out to try and grab the gun from the man’s hand.
Charles’ let out a startled yelp, and actually seemed to try and take a step backwards, before the sound of the gun firing rang through the room.

Tony’s entire body tensed in anticipation of the coming pain, but he didn’t let it deter him from his target. Grabbing hold of the gun, Tony wrestled it away from Charles even as he knocked the other man to the ground. Then, quickly returning to his feet, Tony pointed the gun at Charles’ head and waited for the gunshot pain to hit him.

Except, the only pain Tony could feel was the expected ache from his knee that had slammed into the ground as he’d tackled Charles. The bullet must have missed him.

“Nice try.” He told Charles, who was glaring at him from his position on the ground. “Now hold still, while I arrange for someone to come and arrest you.”

Keeping the gun trained on Charles’ head, Tony pulled his cellphone out of his pocket and quickly dialed Asher’s number.

“Hey, Tony.” Asher greeted cheerfully. “What’s up?”

“Charles Stirling just pulled a gun on me in Abby’s lab.” Tony explained quickly. “I need handcuffs, paramedics, and the FBI. Tell them I got the guy who framed me.”

“Paramedics? Are you alright.”

“I’m fine, but I don’t know about Abby and McGee yet.”

“Right, be right down.”

Sliding his phone back into his pocket, Tony frowned down at Charles. “I’m going to go check on Abby and McGee. If you move, I will shoot you and I won’t miss. Understand?”

Charles’ glare looked as though he intended it to be lethal.
Slowly walking around Charles, Tony moved towards the door to Abby’s office. He’d only made it a few steps, when he saw Abby and McGee’s bodies crumpled on the floor.

Tony’s heart dropped to his stomach as he abandoned his careful movements and dashed towards them. They couldn’t be dead, they just couldn’t!

Dropping to his knee beside McGee, Tony quickly held his fingers to the younger man’s neck. The feel of a slow, but steady pulse was the most relieving thing Tony had ever felt. As was the way Abby’s chest was rising and sinking as she breathed unconsciously.

Tony let out a loud breath. They were alright. Charles hadn’t killed them, he’d just knocked them unconscious. Which was a bit embarrassing really, considering that McGee was an a trained federal agent, but that wasn’t really important.

A movement behind him had Tony spinning around on his knees just in time to see Charles charging at him with a knife in his hand. Raising his gun automatically, Tony fired three shots at Charles. Each bullet hitting the exactly where Tony had aimed it.

Charles’ didn’t stop though. His momentum continued to carry him forward. But with three bullets in his chest, there wasn’t much he could do except collapse forward onto Tony.

Quickly disarming him of the knife, Tony laid the smaller man down beside McGee and Abby before routinely checking for a pulse. Not that he needed to. The frozen expression on Charles’ face told Tony all he needed to know.

28-28-28

“Talk about an exciting day.” JJ commented, resting her head on Tony’s shoulder. “You were arrested and held at gunpoint.”

“It’d be a bit like day in the life a criminal if it had happened the other way around and I’d shot someone, been held at gunpoint and then been arrested.” Tony pointed out.

JJ was glad he could see the humour in it. “How did he even get a job in your lab if he’d been fired
“An excellent question, and one that I plan to ask Paul tomorrow.” Tony sighed. “Or maybe I should just leave it be. I feel like I spend half of my time complaining to him. I’m not sure why he puts up with me.”

JJ rested a hand on Tony’s leg as she remembered what Morgan had said about Tony being considered to be the next Assistant Director of NCIS. Should she tell him? No, it would almost definitely freak him out and he’d had a long enough day already.

“I’m sure he doesn’t mind.” She said instead. “He probably appreciates how much you care about NCIS.”

Tony made an noncommittal noise. “How was the rest of your day?”

“It was alright. We might have to go to Colorado in a few days. There’s a case there that I think we’re going to be asked to consult on soon.”

“Why is it that you have to wait for an invite, but Fornell can just storm in and steal our cases?”

JJ winced sympathetically. “Because unless the crime crosses state lines, involves other federal agencies, or follows a few other rules, it’s not in our jurisdiction.”

“Kara, one of the other Team Leads, asked me how we stop the FBI from stealing our cases today.” Tony commented. “She wasn’t very impressed when I told her that it didn’t matter who solved the case so long as it got solved.”

“Agents like Fornell make my job more difficult.” JJ grumbled. “Somedays I feel as though I spend half my time running around trying to convince people that we’re not all like that.”

“I know you’re not.” Tony tightened his arm around her. “If I ever got a serial murder case that I was having real issues with I’d ask your team for a consult.”

JJ smiled as she imagined them working alongside each other. “That would be fun. Elle would hate
“Is she still giving you trouble.”

JJ grimaced. “Today she tried to convince me that I couldn’t possibly trust you after having only known you for four months.”

Tony shifted slightly. “She’s not wrong.”

“Maybe if I’d met you without any kind of recommendation.” JJ admitted. “But Paula’s known you for how long? And she told me I could trust you.”

“How is Paula?”

JJ smiled. “Coming back to DC. She’s been reassigned to the Pentagon.”

“Oh,” Tony didn’t sound pleased. “Great.”

A loud and abrupt series of knocks at the door had JJ sitting upright on the couch. “It’s almost ten. Who would come over now?”

“Tony?!” A woman’s voice yelled through the door. “I know you’re in there.”

Tony groaned. “Abby.”

“Your forensic technician?” JJ didn’t understand.

“I got her fired today.” Tony’s shoulders slumped. “She was the one who gave Gibbs the evidence against me.”

JJ snorted unsympathetically. “Sounds as though she got herself fired.”
“Tony!” The woman shouted again. “I’m not going away until you open the door.”

“Someone’s going to call the police and report a public disturbance if you don’t answer the door soon.” JJ pointed out.

Tony looked tempted for a moment, before he stood of the couch with a sigh. “I’m sorry about this.”

“It’s not your fault.” JJ reminded him, as she followed him towards the door. “You didn’t invite her to come over and yell at you at ten o’clock at night.”

Tony paused in front of the door, his hand on the handle, and took a deep breath. Then, right before JJ’s eyes, he seemed to swell with confidence before pulling the door open. It was amazing to watch

“Abby.” Tony greeted the woman standing outside the door.

“Tony.” The woman returned coldly. “Can I come in?” Then, without waiting for an answer, the woman pushed her way past Tony and practically stomped her way into the apartment. Though, the stomping might have just been because she was wearing the heaviest looking pair of shoes JJ had ever seen.

If this was Abby, then she was nothing like JJ had imagined her being. Not only was her hair in pigtails, but she was wearing a spiked collar and a black mini-skirt. Which, on top of the knee high, black, platform boots covered in buckles, was just not the sort of thing you expected any kind of professional to wear. Though, JJ supposed that you couldn’t really judge people for what they wore outside the workplace.

“How did you find out where I live?” Tony asked, following Abby further into the apartment.

“I hacked the personnel records.” Abby answered blithely.

JJ’s eyebrows rose in shock. How could she be so casual about admitting that she’d committed a crime?
Tony didn’t even look surprised. “Why?”

“Did you think you could just get me fired without any kind of retribution?!”

“Did you know that you sound just like Charles Stirling?” Tony retorted, sounding unimpressed.

“Well, maybe if you didn’t have a habit of getting people fired there wouldn’t be so many people trying to kill you!”

JJ stiffened and automatically glanced towards Tony’s gun safe which held both her and Tony’s service weapons. This sounded like the kind of conversation that she and Tony should be armed for.

“Who’s she?” Abby asked.

“FBI Special Agent Jareau.” Tony answered simply.

“You’re sleeping with a feebie?” Abby scoffed. “You really have changed.”

JJ opened her mouth to retort, but closed it again when she saw Tony shake his head slightly. Well, if she wasn’t going to actually participate in the conversation, she could at least start subtly moving her way around to the gun safe.

“What do you want, Abby?” Tony asked, sounding tired.

“You got me fired!” Abby snapped again, her eyes flashing angrily.

“No, you got yourself fired when you refused to follow NCIS regulations.” Tony retorted. “You, however, got me arrested for a crime I didn’t commit!”

“How was I supposed to know that? I just followed the evidence. It wasn’t my fault that it pointed straight to you.”
“You’ve known me for five years!” Tony shouted suddenly. “We used to be friends. You should have known that I would never kill anyone!”

“You killed someone today, didn’t you?”

JJ’s mouth dropped open in shock. “What?”

Abby turned towards her with a cruel smirk. “Oh, he didn’t tell you? Tony shot someone in cold blood just a few hours ago.”

“Tony shot a man charging at him with a knife.” JJ retorted angrily. “A man who, from what I understand, had already attempted to frame him with murder, knocked you and Agent McGee unconscious, and then tried to shoot Tony. It was self defence.”

Abby scoffed. “What would you know? And why are you still here? Can’t you see that this is a private conversation?”

“JJ lives here.” Tony told her firmly. “She’s not going anywhere. Just say your piece and get out.”

“And you wonder why I thought you could kill someone?” Abby asked, her face crumbling in hurt. “The Tony I knew would never have let a feebie move in with him. He would have kicked me out, or left Gibbs team! It’s like you’ve been assimilated or something.”

“Or maybe I just grew a spine.” Tony snapped. “And as for not kicking you out, Abby. I’ve known you for five years and you had to hack the personnel files to know where I lived. Me not wanting you in my home isn’t a new thing.”

Abby’s eyes were wide and all the anger seemed to have left her. “When did you get so mean?”

Tony snorted. “Nice try, but you’re not manipulating me with your tears tonight. You got fired because you broke regulations one too many times. You were warned to stop, and you didn’t, so you got fired. None of that is my fault.”

Abby’s face reddened and she crossed her hands over her chest. “Gibbs is going to kill you.”
“Not the first death threat I’ve heard today.” Tony told her. “And I’ll remind you that the last person to try and kill me is now in an FBI body bag.”

“You think you could take Gibbs?” Abby looked almost amused.

Tony didn’t look worried. “Gibbs isn’t going to attack me. He’ll yell at me, and probably try and slap me across the head a few times, and then I’ll report his behaviour to Assistant Director Stewart and it will be added to large pile of reasons that Gibbs will one day be without a job at NCIS.”


“I’m not trying to do anything except my job.” Tony said, walking back to the door and pointedly holding it open. “Goodbye, Abby.”

Abby stared at him for a few seconds, before stomping her way past him and out into the hall. “Gibbs won’t let you get away with this.”

Tony shut the door and then leaned heavily against it with a sigh.

JJ moved forward and wrapped her arms around him. “Are you alright?”

“Would you believe that we used to be friends?” Tony asked, turning around so that he was facing her

“It’s a bit hard to believe.” JJ admitted, resting her head against his chest. She could feel his whole body trembling. “Are you worried about Gibbs?”

“Gibbs won’t do anything except yell.” Tony answered confidently. “Things are going to be weird without Abby around though.”

“ Weird good?”
“A year ago I would have said ‘no way’,” Tony admitted. “But now, yeah, weird good. Abby’s right. I really have changed.”

“Not in a bad way though.” JJ assured him, leaned her head back and using one of her hands to pull Tony’s head down for a kiss.
3 Months Later

“Hey, Juliet, this is Tony Dinozzo.” Tony greeted the assistant on the other end of the phone. “Has Paul got a minute to see me?”

“Of course, Agent Dinozzo.” Juliet answered, without hesitation. “Shall I let him know that you’re coming down now?”

“Sure.” Tony agreed, before setting down the phone and standing up from his desk. He looked around at his team, taking in their exhausted and discouraged expressions, and sighed. “I’m off to see the wizard, folks, and when I get back I expect you to have all gone out for something to eat. Bring me back something with meat in it.”

Francis looked frustrated. “I don’t need to eat.”

“Everyone need to eat.” Tony retorted, trying not to notice the new stress lines that had appeared on Francis’ face. “And if you don’t eat now, you won’t have the energy to put your time to good use later. We’ve been at this for days. Clearly it’s a marathon, rather than a sprint. That means we need to pace ourselves, and that means eating.”

“What if someone else dies because we were too busy eating to save them?”

“Then they die.” Tony said, hoping the words didn’t sound as harsh and uncaring as they felt. It wasn’t that he didn’t sympathise with Francis, or even that he didn’t dread receiving yet another call about the body of a murdered woman but, if experience had taught him anything, it was that distance was important. “But if that happens, then it wasn’t our fault. We can only do our best, and none of us are at our best when we haven’t eaten.”

Asher nodded, and stood up from in desk. “Come on, Francis, Wardle. Some fresh air will do us good.”
“I’ll ride down with you.” Tony told them, as they each began moving towards the elevator. “I’ve got a meeting with Paul.”

“Why?” Francis asked, still sounding frustrated. “What can he do?”

A shiver ran down Tony’s spine as Francis’ tone reminded him of McGee’s first few months of being an agent. McGee had never been truly insubordinate during those first months, that had come later, but his tone had often been bordering on disrespect. Tony had let it slide then, but there was no way he was going to make that mistake again.

“Simmer down, Francis.” He warned, jabbing at the elevator button. “We’re all tired and frustrated. Don’t take your frustration out on us.”

Francis jaw clenched and for a moment Tony thought that the man was going to try and challenge him, but then the younger agent’s shoulders slumped. “Sorry, Tony. I just want to get this guy.”

“We will.” Tony assured him confidently. “We just need a little help is all.”

Asher’s eyes widened, as the elevator door opened. “You’re going to try and get the FBI involved?”

“That’s what they’re there for.” Tony reminded him. “The BAU specializes in serial killers, they just need to be invited into an investigation.”

“Normally we spend our time trying to fend off FBI involvement.” Asher pointed out evenly.

“That’s because our priorities are messed up.” Tony retorted, for what felt like the dozenth time in a couple of months. “If the FBI can help us solve our cases, why wouldn’t we want their help?”

“I’m not arguing with you.” Asher said. “I’m just saying, this is really going to upset some people.”

“I don’t care what Gibbs, or anyone else thinks. If the BAU can save even one potential victim, then it’s worth it.”
Asher nodded slowly. “Yeah, I guess it is. Do you want us to bring you back coffee with your lunch?”

Allowing Asher’s question to move their conversation to a lighter topic, Tony offered his friend a grin. “What kind of question is that? You know I never turn down coffee!”

“Which explains so much about you.” Asher teased, though Tony could see lines of tension around his eyes.

“ Doesn’t it just.” Tony agreed, as the elevator opened onto the floor that Paul worked out of. “I’ll see you guys soon.”

Despite having been in his new position for four months, Tony could hardly believe how easy it was for him to arrange to speak with the Assistant Director. Not only that, but his and Paul’s conversations had been happenings so regularly that Juliet had begun to always have a hot coffee waiting when Tony arrived. Tony practically expected the coffee now, which seemed so bizarre considering how startled he’d been the first time she had offered him one.

“Good afternoon, Agent Dinozzo.” Juliet greeted, as Tony approached her desk. “Director Stewart is ready for you, and I’ve left your coffee on his desk.”

“Good afternoon, Juliet.” Tony offered her a bright smile. “One day you’re really going to have to start calling me Tony.”

“Of course, Agent Dinozzo.” Juliet’s eyes sparkled. “Any day now, I’m sure.”

Tony shook his head in amusement as he continued on to Paul’s office. “Thanks for the coffee.”

The sight of Paul sitting behind his desk, surrounded by photos of his grandchildren, was a familiar one to Tony and, as he greeted the older man, he couldn’t help but feel a twinge of grief at the thought of the man’s fast approaching retirement. Stewart was due to retire in just under a month and there still hadn’t been an announcement about who would be taking his place. Tony had spent more than a little time worrying about who he would have to report to next.

“Tony, good to see you.” Paul declared, looking up from his computer. “Come in, sit down. That’s your coffee there.”
“Hey, Paul.” Tony offered with a weary smile, moving to sit in his usual chair. The coffee on the desk was still piping hot, if the steam coming off it was anything to go by, but Tony reached for it regardless. It felt like hours since his last coffee.

“How’s the case going?”

“It’s not.” Tony admitted with a grimace. “We have three dead women, and very few leads. Whoever this guy is, he’s thorough. No DNA, no fingerprints, no seeming connection between the women…”

“Except that they’re all married to marine officers stationed overseas.” Paul reminded him.

“Except that.” Tony agreed, taking a tentative sip of coffee. “My team have been working late on this case all week and we’ve got nothing. I’m frustrated, my team are discouraged and, there’s a good chance that we’ll have another murdered navy wife by the weekend.”

Paul rubbed at his mouth. “So what do you want to do?”

“Ask the FBI’s Behavioural Analysis Unit for a consult.” Tony admitted, before involuntarily holding his breath as he waited for Paul’s reaction. Actively requesting an FBI consult was practically unheard of at NCIS. There was too much agency pride in the way.

“You think they could help?” Paul asked evenly.

“I know they could.” Tony answered, leaning forward in his chair. “Serial murders are different from the ones that we’re used to. Not only is the motive different, but there is rarely the same connection between the murderer and the victims. Which means that, when there’s virtually no forensic evidence, all you’ve really got to go on is the specific details of how the murder was committed. My team aren’t profilers. They’re investigators. We’re just going over the same evidence over and over again and not finding anything. Maybe the BAU will see something that we’ve missed.”

Paul held up a hand to halt Tony’s passionate plea. “Alright, you’ve convinced me. I’ll have to get Director Shepard to sign off on it, but I doubt that will be much of a problem.
Tony couldn’t help his wince. He had very little faith in Shepard’s ability to do her job without letting personal feelings get in the way. The fact that Gibbs was still running rampant in the bullpen was proof enough of that. What if her sense of personal pride got in the way of them calling in the help they needed to solve the murders?

Paul sighed. “I know you don’t like Director Shepard, Tony, but she will make the right call here. She isn’t one to let pride get in the way of justice.”

Tony swallowed, uncomfortable at having been so easily read. “I don’t know Director Shepard enough to have an opinion on her.”

Paul rolled his eyes. “Rubbish. You pull a face every time she comes up in conversation. I’m just glad that you have the good sense to keep a straight face when she’s in front of you.”

“If you trust Director Shepard to approve this request then I trust you.” Tony said evenly.

Paul frowned. “You’re going to need to learn to work with her, Tony. She’s the Director of our agency.”

“I need to know how to work with you, and with whoever replaces you next month.” Tony disagreed. “I can count the number of times I’ve interacted with Shepard on one hand.”

Paul’s face was unreadable for a moment, but then he leant forward in his chair with a serious expression. “Tony,” He paused for a few seconds, looking almost nervous. “Tony, both SecNav and Director Shepard have approved my replacement.”

Tony’s stomach dropped. There could only be one reason why Paul was so nervous to tell him, and that was if he was planning on appointing Gibbs to the role. Tony couldn’t think of anyone worse, and not just because of the way Gibbs had been harassing him over his involvement in Abby getting fired.

“Please tell me it’s not Gibbs!”

Paul’s mouth dropped open. “What? No, of course not. Tony, it’s you.”
“What?” Tony stared at him in disbelief, his mouth suddenly as dry as a desert. “You want to make me an Assistant Director? I’ve only just been put in charge of a team, and you want to put me in charge of all of them?”

“I was considering you for the position before you even made those applications last October.” Paul commented. “I just hadn’t figured out how to get you away from Gibbs’ team.”

“There’s no way I can do your job.” Tony blurted out.

“You’re already doing half of my job.” Paul countered. “You support and advise the other teams. You stand up and defend junior agents, and report and consider consequences for agents who mess up. Admittedly, there’s a bit more to it, but I’ll show the ropes over the next month so that it’s not such a big jump.”

Tony couldn’t believe that he was even having this conversation. “I’m a detective! Not a paper pusher.”

“There’s no hard rule that would prevent you from getting involved in cases.” Paul offered. “You would just act as a consultant, rather than a primary investigator.”

Tony stared at him. “You can’t be serious about this. Paul, I’m painfully unqualified. I’ve only been a Team Lead for four months, and before that I was hardly even a Senior Field Agent. Not to mention that I’m still seeing a shrink every week. There’s got to be someone more qualified than I am.”

“There is.” Paul admitted and, for moment, Tony felt as though he could breathe again. “But they’re not right for the job. You are.”

“And if I refuse.” Tony asked cautiously.

Paul sighed. “If you refuse then you’ll likely have to put up with working for the kind of agent who would refuse your request for FBI consultation because of agency pride.”

“Right.” Tony bit his lip, his mind felt as though he was swirling out of control. “You couldn’t have told me this after we’d solved the case?”
“I’ve been meaning to tell you for the last few weeks.” Paul admitted. “There just hasn’t been a good time. Director Shepard and SecNav have run out of patience.”

“Do I have to decide now?”

Paul shook his head. “No, we understand that you’ll need time to talk it over with your girlfriend.”

Tony blinked, he hadn’t considered that JJ might have an opinion on the job offer. The last time he’d discussed this sort of thing with a woman, he’d been asking Wendy what she thought of the idea of him becoming a federal agent. She’d told him to take the job and then had broken up with him a few months later.

“Yeah,” Tony acknowledged, when it became clear that Paul was waiting for him to say something. “I’ll have an answer for you as soon as I can.”

29-29-29

JJ sighed and rubbed at her forehead as she closed the case file in front of her and moved it onto the pile to her left. The case had been sent to them for consult from the local law enforcement at Starksville, Mississippi, who had just connected three different murder cases that had been committed over three years. JJ didn’t disagree with their assessment but, according to the pattern, the unsub wasn’t due to strike again for another year. Hopefully, with some notes from Reid, the local police force would manage to identify the unsub in that time span. Either way, it just wasn’t urgent enough to justify the whole team flying out to help.

Something that JJ couldn’t help but feel relieved about. She and Tony had been passing each other like ships in the night for almost two weeks now, and she really didn’t want to exacerbate the issue by being in Mississippi of all things. First she had been away on case and then, the day before she got back, Tony’s team had been called out on a murder case that was still consuming all his time. For the last week, he had gotten home late and left early, presuming he came home at all, and in those brief moments when they were together he’d been tired and distracted.

Reaching for the next case file on her pile, JJ started in surprise as the blaring ring of her desk phone broke the calm silence of her office.

“Good afternoon, you’ve reached Agent Jareau.”
“Good afternoon, this is Assistant Director Stewart from NCIS.”

JJ blinked in surprise. She knew who Stewart was, Tony talked about him all the time, but why would he be ringing her? Unless…

“Is Tony alright?” She asked, her stomach dropping in the anticipation of horror.

“Pardon?” Stewart sounded confused. “Oh, yes, he’s fine. My apologies for startling you, Agent Jareau. I’m ringing regarding another matter. Agent Dinozzo has requested a BAU consult for the case he is currently working on. My assistant is faxing the case file through to you now, but I wanted to speak to you in person.”

The fax machine came to life, as if on cue, and JJ stood up, before realising that the length of the phone cord wouldn’t allow her to retrieve the fax while talking on her desk phone. Damn. Why couldn’t Stewart have rung her cellphone.

“I see.” She answered, slowly sitting down again. Her foot beginning to tap frustratedly against the floor. She needed to be professional about this. “Well, I can’t make any promises without having read through the file, but I will look at it as soon as I get off the phone with you.”

“Thank you, Agent Jareau.” Stewart said, before pausing. “I’m sure you will have already considered this, but may I suggest that you not be the only agent to look over the file. Your relationship with Tony might give the appearance of favouritism.”

JJ hadn’t considered that. Though, she liked to think that she would have if her brain hadn’t been stuck on the idea that her team might be able to help Tony with the case that seemed to be eating him alive. It was a good idea though.

“Of course, Director Stewart, I’ll ask Agent Hotchner to look through the file with me.”

“Excellent, thank you.” Stewart sounded pleased. “Have a good day, Agent Jareau.”

“You too, sir.” JJ responded, before setting the phone down with the gentleness that she didn’t feel and rushing for the fax machine which was still spitting out pages of the case file.
Picking up the first page, JJ skimmed through it. Some of the information she knew already from her conversations with Tony, but some of it was new. Three murders in one week, one every other day. All victims had lived on the Quantico Marine Corps Base, and were the wives of marines who were currently stationed overseas. Each woman had been brutally stabbed numerous times, and their fully clothed bodies had been found on the base with a marine corps uniform tie draped over their eyes.

Turning the page, JJ winced at the sight of a crime scene photo that showed one of the victims as they had been found. It wasn’t a pretty sight. Clearly the unsub wasn’t concerned with precision or cleanliness.

When the fax machine finally finished printing out the case file, JJ collected the papers up and put them in a spare folder. Then she made her way to Hotch’s office. It seemed like the kind of case that the team would take - especially considering how quickly each murder followed the last one - but she couldn’t make that decision on her own.

“Hotch?” JJ rapped her knuckles against Hotch’s door. “Do you have a minute.”

Hotch looked up from his desk, his gaze immediately narrowing in on the folder in her hands. “Do we have a case?”

“I think so.” JJ admitted, walking forward and handing Hotch the case file. “Tony is requesting our help.”

Hotch raised an eyebrow. “This is one of NCIS’ cases?”

“Yes, I just got off the phone with their Assistant Director.”

“This is unprecedented. NCIS has never requested a BAU consultation.” Hotch admitted, before falling silent as he began to read the file.

JJ sat quietly in the nearest chair and tried not to tap her foot as she waited for Hotch to finish his reading. She really wanted him to say yes. Surely the interagency cooperation brownie points they would earn from accepting the request for a consult would be enough to push Hotch over the edge. The ongoing rivalry between the agencies was both famous and inefficient.
“Has Tony discussed this case with you?” Hotch asked, when he finally looked up from the folder.

“We don’t really discuss ongoing cases.” JJ answered, glad that she could truthfully give the right answer. “But I know that he and his team haven’t had a break in the case yet. There’s very little forensic evidence, and every avenue they try is a dead end. The whole team has been putting in over time.”

“You think we should take it?”

“If we don’t, another woman could be dead in two days.”

Hotch nodded and reached for his phone. “Tell the team that we’ve got a new case. We’ll brief on it in ten minutes.”

Chapter End Notes

Some of you may have noticed that this story now has a finished length (33 chapters) and, if you’ve done that maths, then you’ll know that this is the 5th to last chapter.

I’m sure you’re all wondering how life will go on without your weekly dose of this story, but all I can suggest is that once it’s finished you can just start reading it again :P
“Hey, Tony,” JJ’s voice was sweet relief to Tony’s exhausted ears. “Hotch has approved our team to take the case.”

Tony slumped back against his chair in relief. “What happens from here?”

“Some of our team will go straight to Quantico to get a fresh look at the crime scenes. Can you send someone from your team to meet them?”

“I’ll send all three of them.” Tony decided, noting that he had the attention of his whole team. “It’ll be a good learning experience for them.”

“Okay, I’ll let Gideon know. The rest of the team will come straight to your offices can get set up. Is there a conference room that we can use?”

Tony blinked in surprise. “You’ll be working from here? But your offices are closer to Quantico.”

“They are, but a lot of what we do involves working with the local team.” JJ explained. “Working out of the same building at you will make that easier.”

“I’ll sort out a room for you then.” Tony said, a spark of excited anticipation growing within him. He hadn’t considered that the BAU’s involvement would lead to him and JJ actually working together. “Anything in particular that you need?”

“A whiteboard, or two if that’s possible.” JJ started, and Tony quickly scrambled for pen and paper so that he could write it down. “And half of the team can’t function without a coffee in their hand, so anything that could help with that would be great as well.”

“I’ll put you in conference room one then.” Tony decided. “It has one of those large, portable kettle things.”

“Spencer will be delighted.” JJ’s smile was audible. “Other than that, we’ll just need copies of all of your team’s case notes. Oh, and a map of the Quantico base.”
Tony nodded, as he wrote each item down on his paper. “I’ll have them ready for you. What time should my team be at Quantico?”

“Gideon, Morgan, and Elle are ready to leave now, so as soon as possible.”

“I’ll send them now then,” Tony told her. “They should be there in about an hour, and I’ll ring ahead and let the base security know to expect your team.”

“Oh,” JJ sounded a bit surprised. “Alright.”

Tony winced, he hadn’t meant to step on her toes. “Sorry, you can ring the base if you want. I don’t want to get in your way.”

“I don’t mind, Tony.” JJ sounded amused. “It makes sense for you to be the one to let them know Gideon and the team are coming. I was just surprised.”

“Oh, good then.” Tony quickly made a note for him to ring Quantico at the bottom of his list. “I guess I’ll see you soon then.”

“Yeah.” JJ sounded just as pleased at the prospect as Tony felt. “We should be with you in about half an hour. Can I bring you anything? Coffee? A sandwich?”

“We just had lunch.” Tony admitted, glancing towards the corner of his desk where the remains of his burger sat. “But I wouldn’t say no to another cup of coffee.”

“One cup of coffee coming up.” JJ promised. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Yeah,” Tony couldn’t help his wide smile. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Hanging up the phone, Tony looked around at his three team members. None of whom were even attempting to give the appearance that they hadn’t been listening in to his phone conversation.
“So they’re coming?” Asher asked after a few seconds.

“Yeah,” Tony felt more relaxed just thinking about it. “Half of the team are coming straight here, and you three are going to meet the rest of them in Quantico. They want to look over the crime scenes.”

Francis was frowning. “But we’ve already processed them.”

“Profiler look for different things in a crime scene.” Tony explained, more patiently than he felt. Francis had been having some issues with the idea of the FBI coming in and taking the case away from them. Tony knew that it was the younger man’s exhaustion and stress talking, but that didn’t make it any less frustrating.

“Why are you sending all of us?” Wardle asked curiously.

“Because it will be a good learning experience.” Tony explained. “It might help you see crime scenes from a different angle. You should probably get going. Agents Gideon, Morgan, and Greenaway will be meeting you there in under an hour.”

“Right,” Asher stood up, before bending down to pick up his bag. “Come on then, probies, let’s go see what the FBI profilers can teach us about crime scenes.”

Wardle and Francis followed Asher’s direction with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Mostly due to the fact that Wardle’s automatic response to an order was still to follow it without question.

Asher moved towards Tony’s desk, as the junior agents got themselves organised, and lowered his voice. “Anything you can tell me about these three agents? I wasn’t really focussed on them when we met in December.”

“Greenaway’s a piece of work.” Tony answered quietly. “Gideon’s very good at what he does, but not so good at playing nice, and Morgan’s great. If you have any questions, ask Morgan. He’ll answer it without ego getting in the way. And maybe give Francis and Wardle a rundown on what profiling is while you drive. I doubt they’ve ever come across it before.”

“Sure thing.” Asher agreed easily, before turning his attention to the junior agents in question and jerking his head towards the elevator. “Let’s move out.”
Tony watched them go for a few seconds, before turning his attention to the list on his desk. First things first, he needed to ring Quantico and let them know that an FBI invasion was coming. Then he’d focus his attention on getting conference room one ready for their guests.

It felt strange to be focussing his attention on menial details like filling the kettle up with water, but it was also strangely relieving. If Tony had been stuck behind his desk, he would have just been running the same information that he’d already run and coming with no results. They needed more evidence, something more that would give them a break in the case, but the fact that a fourth body was expected in less than forty eight hours was hardly a comfort.

What was comforting was the knowledge that help was coming. Tony’s team might not have the evidence they needed to solve the case, but hopefully the BAU would. And, so long as the murderer’s pattern held, they had a day and a half to find him before he killed a fourth woman. Surely between the two teams they could solve the case in that time?

30-30-30

JJ knew that it was probably a bit catty, but she’d been relieved when Hotch announced that Elle would be going to Quantico with Gideon and Morgan. And it wasn’t just for personal reasons either. Elle had a frustrating way of being an fly in the ointment that was interagency cooperation.

It was strange to be walking into NCIS with Hotch and Spencer. The feel to the building was much closer to the FBI than to the local police station that they usually worked out of when they were consulting on a case. There were definite differences between the NCIS and the FBI though, not the least being the horrible orange colour that covered the walls.

JJ had vaguely remembered the orange from when she’d visited the building months earlier with Tony, but that didn’t make it any less startling.

“Orange is said to be the colour of determination and success.” Spencer commented, as they stepped out the elevator together.

“So why is our office painted blue?” JJ asked, smiling as she noticed Tony striding towards them.

“I don’t know.” Spencer admitted. “Blue is said to represent trust, truth, and wisdom. But it could just be that whoever painted it had good taste.”
JJ’s mouth dropped open and she barely managed to bite back a laugh. The comment had just been so ‘un-Spencer-like’.

“Agent Hotchner,” Tony greeted, reaching out a hand to shake Hotch’s. “Thank you for coming. I can’t tell you how glad we are to have you.”

JJ couldn’t help but notice that some of the other agents in the room didn’t seem quite so pleased to see them.

“Thank you, Agent Dinozzo.” Hotch replied, grasping Tony’s hand. “We’re glad to be able to help.”

JJ quickly shifted the coffee that she’d bought Tony into her left hand as she noticed his attention turning towards her, but he didn’t offer to shake her hand. Instead, he stepped forward and bent slightly to kiss her on the cheek. It was completely unexpected, but certainly not unwelcome - though JJ couldn’t say the same about the blush she could feel spreading across her cheeks. She was so glad Elle wasn’t there to make snarky comments under her breath.

“Hey, JJ,” Tony said, with a gentle smile. “Is that coffee for me?”

JJ huffed out a quiet laugh as she offered him the coffee. “Of course, strong, white, and sweetened, just as you like it.”

“Thank you.” Tony said sincerely, but didn’t bring the coffee up to his mouth. Instead he turned to Spencer. “Hey, man. Good to see you.”

“Good to see you too.” Spencer agreed, with a small smile.

Tony turned back to Hotch, his expression growing more serious. “I’ve set up a conference room for your team to work from. Let me know if you need anything that isn’t there.”

Hotch nodded once. “Thank you.”
“No worries.” Tony said, his smile reappearing. “It’s right this way.”

“Dinozzo!” A growling voice called suddenly, from the right side of the large room.

Tony’s eyes slid shut and he suddenly looked exhausted, but by the time he opened his eyes again all signs of the exhaustion were gone. “How can I help you, Agent Gibbs?” He asked, as he turned around to face the silver headed agent who had spoken.

JJ’s eyes narrowed as she took in the man in front of her. So this was the man whose leadership style had put Tony in therapy.

“Who are they?” Gibbs snapped out, jerking his head towards JJ, Hotch, and Spencer.

“The FBI Behavioural Analysis Unit.” Tony offered evenly. “They’ve agreed to consult with my team on the serial case we’re working right now.”

Gibbs’ jaw tightened. “You’ve got the FBI helping you now? What kind of agent are you, Dinozzo?”

“The kind whose willing to do anything it takes to save lives.” Tony answered. “You’d know something about that, wouldn’t you, Gibbs? That’s practically your M.O.”

“Don’t you get smart with me, Dinozzo!” Gibbs growled.

“Or what?” Tony challenged, before suddenly sighing loudly and letting his shoulders drop. “Look, Gibbs, I don’t want to have it out with you in the middle of the bullpen, and especially not with the FBI watching on. What do you want?”

For a moment it looked as though Gibbs was going to instigate something with Tony anyway, but then the older agent shook his head. “What the hell happened to you, Dinozzo?”

“Therapy.” Tony admitted, unashamedly. “Hours and hours of therapy. It does wonders, you know.”
Gibbs shook his head in obvious disgust, before turning around and making his way back in the direction that he’d come in.

Tony sighed, and turned to Hotch. “Sorry, Agent Hotchner. That was inappropriate.”

Hotch shook his head. “You don’t need to apologise, Agent Dinozzo. You were hardly the instigator.”

“It’s Tony,” Tony told him, with a smile.

“Aaron.” Hotch offered in turn.

Tony’s smile grew. “Well, then, Aaron, I should probably show you the conference room you’ll be working out of.”

As Tony turned to lead them through the bullpen, JJ shared a worried look with Hotch. It wasn’t unusual for them to encounter some kind of tension or conflict within the team they consulted with, but it was rarely as obvious as the altercation they had just witnessed.

JJ couldn’t imagine anyone getting away with that kind of behaviour at the BAU, and she could only hope that it wasn’t accepted in the other FBI units either. But then, half the stories Tony told about NCIS had JJ questioning the sanity of the NCIS management. Sure they had fired Abby and reassigned McGee, but only when Tony had pushed them to. And, even so, as far she knew they hadn’t brought Abby up on any kind charges for hacking into their personnel records. They’d just let her get away with it. Just like they hadn’t stopped Gibbs from regularly bullying Tony for his part in the whole drama.

It was ridiculous! And JJ couldn’t help but look forward for the day when Tony finally got sick of it all and decided to resign and join another agency. (Though she couldn’t help but remember the comment Morgan had made months earlier about Tony being lined up to be the next Assistant Director.)

“In here,” Tony said suddenly, holding a door open for them. “The water urn is hot, so feel free to make yourselves some coffee and, as I said, let me know if you need anything else. Or if you have any questions.”
“Thank you.” Hotch said, placing his briefcase on the floor beside the table. “We’ll probably have more questions when the rest of our team gets here.”

JJ shook her head in amusement as Spencer made a beeline for the bench holding the coffee supplies. They had only just finished the coffee that they’d picked up on their way over. Her hands would be trembling like an addict’s if she ever drank as much coffee as Spencer.

“Alright,” Tony looked a little awkward. “Well, I’ll leave you to it then.”

JJ turned to Hotch, as Tony started to shut to the door behind him. “Do you mind if I…?”

“Go.” Hotch interrupted, looking amused.

“Thanks,” JJ quickly followed Tony out of the room, just in time to see him turn a corner to her left. “Tony!”

Tony appeared back around the corner within seconds. “Did your team need something? I put pens, stickers, and string to use on the map in the small container on the table.”

“They’re fine.” JJ assured him, walking forward so that she could slip one of her hands into his bigger one. “How are you?”

“I’m fine.”

JJ was sure that her skepticism was written on her face. “Yeah?”

Tony’s whole body seemed to sag, and weary lines appeared on his face. “I’m tired.”

“I’m not surprised.” JJ offered, squeezing his hand. “You want to go for a walk to get some coffee?”

“Coffee?” Tony asked, glancing to the coffee cup in his hand and then back to JJ.
“Fresh air.” JJ corrected. “And maybe something to eat.”

Tony didn’t look convinced. “Don’t your team need you?”

“Hotch said it was fine.” JJ offered. “Besides, my job is to liase with the local team.”

Tony’s mouth quirked up into a smile. “Somehow I don’t think that this is what your job usually looks like.”

“Come on,” JJ cajoled, tugging Tony’s hand in the direction that he’d been heading before she stopped him. “You’ll think better once you’ve had some fresh air. Besides, we need to brace ourselves for Elle.”

“She still being a pain?” Tony asked sympathetically, as he allowed JJ to tug him into motion.

“Meh,” JJ shrugged, uncaringly. “No more than usual, though I imagine your presence will inspire a few extra comments.”

“I don’t see why.” Tony commented, as the corridor led them into the bullpen. “I’ve only met her a few times.”

“Penelope and I have a theory.” JJ offered, before regretting it. She really doubted that Tony would like the conclusion that they’d come to.

“Yeah?”

“Well, the BAU has a bit of a reputation of being made up of the best of the best.” JJ started. “It’s not really true, since we only take people with a specific skill set, but we think that Elle took her acceptance into the team as confirmation that she was one of the best in her field.”

Tony stopped at a grouping of desks, before retrieving something out of one of the desk drawers. “So?”
“So you’re just as good as her, if not better.” JJ said, looking around the work area. “And you’re not even with the FBI, let alone part of the BAU.”

Tony frowned, as he started moving towards the elevator. “My skill set is completely different from hers. I’m an investigator who can do undercover work. She’s a profiler.”

“You can profile.” JJ retorted. “I’ve heard you doing it. And I’m not saying it makes all the much sense outside of Elle’s brain, but that’s mine and Penelope’s theory.”

“Tony, JJ.” A voice called from their left as they approached the elevator.

Turning towards the voice, JJ couldn’t help but smile when she saw Andrew approaching them. She hadn’t considered that she would see him while she was NCIS.

“Hey, Andrew.” She smiled, stepping forward to give him a friendly hug. “How’s Margie?”

“She’s good.” Andrew answered easily, stretching out a hand towards Tony. “Though she’ll be jealous when I tell her that I saw you today. She was just saying last night that we should have you two and the Balboa’s over for dinner. We haven’t seen you in nearly a month.”

“Yeah, sorry, my work’s been really busy.” JJ explained. “Tell Margie that dinner sounds great, and that I’ll give her a ring once we get this case wrapped up.”

“How’s the case going?” Andrew asked Tony. “Anything I can do to help?”

“You know that Gibbs’ll have your ass if he hears that you’ve offered.” Tony warned. “But I think we’ll be fine with the help of JJ’s team - there’s six of them.”

“Plus our Technical Analysis.” JJ added.

Andrew raised his eyebrows. “You’ll have this thing sewn up in no time.”

“Here’s hoping.” Tony said, sounding tired.

“I don’t envy you, man.” Tony sympathised, as Andrew grimaced.

“I swear, if Stewart, or whoever replaces him, doesn’t transfer me soon I’m going to be jumping ship to the FBI.” Andrew grumbled. “I’ll see you both around.”

JJ watched him go, before turning to the elevator and pressing the button. It was a pleasant surprise to see the doors open immediately. “Poor guy. Do you think he’ll be transferred soon?”

Tony was frowning as they entered the elevator. “I guess that depends on whether a new position opens up.”

“Stewart must have been expecting one to open up though, right? He did promise that Andrew wouldn’t have to stay on Gibbs’ team for long and it’s already been, what, six months?”

“Seven.” Tony corrected, before suddenly stepping forward and jabbing the emergency stop button.

JJ startled in surprise. “What happened? Why did you stop the elevator?”

“There’s something I need to tell you.” Tony explained. “No one can overhear us in here.”

JJ eyed him quizzically. “But won’t security notice that the elevator has stopped and send people to help?”

Tony scoffed. “They’ll just presume that Gibbs is using it as his private office again. I can’t tell you how many times Gibbs has stopped this elevator just so he could have a conversation.”

“This place is so strange.” JJ commented, shaking her head in bemusement. “What did you want to tell me?”
Tony ran a hand through his hair. “I was talking to Paul today and he said,” He exhaled loudly. “He said that they want me to take his place when he retires next month.”

JJ’s mouth dropped open. “Really? I mean, I knew they were considering you for it, but then you didn’t say anything so…”

“You knew they were considering me? Why didn’t you tell me? Who told you?”

JJ winced. “I found out a few months ago. Morgan told me on the day that you were arrested, but I didn’t want to tell you straight away because you had enough on your plate. And then you were attacked by the lab assistant, and then Abby was fired and Gibbs was being an ass.”

“How did Morgan find out?”

“He did some asking around about you.” JJ answered. “He also said that you’d probably be made director of NCIS sometime in the next ten years.”

“Director?” Tony repeated, running a hand through his hair again. “I can’t believe this. I’m a detective, not a paper pusher or a politician.”

“You’re more than just a detective, Tony. You’re a good leader. You’re encouraging. You have a strong ethical code, and a good understanding of inter-agency interactions. You know how to mentor younger agents, and you have a vision of how NCIS could be better.”

Tony stared at her. “So you think I should take the position?”

“I think it’s worth considering.” JJ hedged.

“I am considering it.” Tony retorted. “I want to know whether you think I should do it.”

JJ considered Tony’s expression, before stepping closer so that she could take his hands in hers. “Yeah, I do. I think you’d be amazing at it, and I think that you’d probably enjoy it a lot more than you think you would.”
“Gibbs would have a fit.” Tony commented, pulling his hands out of her grasp and wrapping her in a hug. “And I can only imagine McGee’s expression when he finds out.”

JJ frowned into Tony’s shirt. “You shouldn’t do it just because I think you should.”

“I know.” Tony rested his cheek against her head. “I haven’t made up my mind yet. I’m not going to decide anything until after we’ve solved this case.”

“And maybe had at least one good night of sleep and a day off?” JJ suggested.

Tony chuckled quietly. “And that.”
Tony watched anxiously as his team and the BAU team all gathered around the large conference table. JJ, Aaron, and Reid had been in the NCIS building for more than three hours, while the rest of the team had been at Quantico, and this would be the first time they were all going to share notes. He really hoped that the BAU team had found something of worth. They had less than forty eight hours until the next murder, and that was presuming that the murderer kept to his pattern.

Aaron cleared his throat. “Before we get into specifics, Tony, I’d like to hear your take on the unsub. JJ tells me that you have some profiling experience.”

Tony couldn’t help but feel a little frustrated as he glanced towards JJ. He didn’t understand why she was so insistent that what he did was profiling. He would have thought that, after having worked with actual profilers for over two years, she would have been the one of the first to realise that what he did was only a cheap imitation of profiling.

“I wouldn’t say that.” Tony answered eventually. “I know how to read people, but there’s a difference between reading people and reading crime scenes.”

“There is.” Aaron agreed. “Still, I’m interested in your perspective. What’s your main theory?”

Tony sighed, but moved to sit in one of the few empty chairs around the table. It put him almost directly across from Agent Greenaway, and he could see the frustrated jealousy that JJ had talked about in her expression. Clearly JJ had a few profiling skills of her own.

“We’ve had three murders, all of them of middle aged women.” Tony started, ignoring Agent Greenaway’s unimpressed expression. He really wasn’t sure what Aaron was wanting from him. “There doesn’t seem to be any sexual element to the murders, which suggests that the victims represent something to their murderer. I know that the first victim is often the most significant to the murderer, but we’ve been looking for some kind of connection there for days and haven’t found anything.

“So my theory is that the first victim was just as much a representation of the target of his rage as the second and third victims. Which, given the lack of sexual element, the victims’ ages, and the remorse demonstrated by the tie over the victims eyes, makes me think they might represent his mother.”
“He’s definitely male - women just don’t stab people that messily. And I’d say that he’s probably young. We haven’t found much forensic evidence to go on which at first made me think that he was careful, but I’m starting to wonder if he’s not just lucky. And he’s a marine.”

“Just because the victims were found on a marine base doesn’t mean he’s a marine.” Agent Greenaway argued. “Maybe he’s just got a thing against navy wives.”

“Except there’s nothing about the first murder that suggests that it was premeditated.” Tony retorted, there was just something about her that put his back up. “Which begs the question: where did he get the marine tie that was found draped over the victim’s eyes? The most likely answer is that he was wearing the tie when something prompted him to lash out and kill the first victim.”

“I’m impressed.” Morgan commented, from where he was leaning back against his chair beside Francis. “You’ve done half our job for us. I agree that the murders weren’t premeditated.”

“They’re exactly two days apart.” Asher pointed out. “And he used the same knife for each murder.”

“Oh, he goes looking for a victim.” Gideon put in. “But his choice of who to kill is a spontaneous one. I doubt even he knows what he’s looking for.”

“That’s the lynchpin of the case then, isn’t it.” Greenaway decided. “Why these women?”

“And what happened last week to prompt him into killing.” Morgan added.

“Whatever it was, it may have been connected to why he was in dress uniform.” Greenaway commented. “We know that death can often be a trigger. What if he was at a funeral earlier in the day.”

“The funeral of who though?” Tony asked. “Was it the death of the woman that the victims represent to him? Or someone else?”

“Is it notable that he’s only killed women who were married to marines, rather than female marines?” Morgan asked. “Or is just statistical?”
“Does he even know the difference?” Greenaway asked. “If he’s coming across these women in the dark he won’t know anything about them except what’s obvious. All he would have known was that they were all brunet and all between thirty five and forty.”

Tony glanced over to where Francis and Wardle were both watching the conversation beside Asher. Both junior agents had wide eyes, and Tony hoped that they were using the opportunity as a learning experience rather than feeling left out.

“Well, if the victims are representing the unsub’s mother then, either she had him very young, or he hasn’t seen her in a few years.” Morgan put in.

“That could be where his anger is coming from.” Tony pointed out. “If his mother walked out on the family, a death in the family might have brought out his anger at being abandoned by his mother. Especially if it was his father’s death. And, if his father was a veteran, it would explain why he’s having such a strong reaction to women on the streets of Quantico.”

“And you claim not to be a profiler.” JJ commented quietly, as she left the conference team with Tony and his team. “If this pays off, you will have practically solved the case without us.”

“And if it doesn’t, I’ll be at square one again.” Tony pointed out. “Besides, it’s not as though your whole team wasn’t thinking it. Not to mention that we don’t have the resources to do what Penelope does.”

“That was amazing, Tony!” Agent Francis gushed, with a broad smile.

JJ, who was still working through her temptation to fangirl over the fact that she was standing next to ‘Tony Francis’, the Redskin’s record breaking tight end, swallowed heavily under the bright beam that was Francis’ smile. It was one thing to have the autographs that Tony had brought home for her, but to actually be meeting Tony Francis? She was just trying not to embarrass herself.

“They’re good at what they do.” Tony agreed with Francis. “Did you learn anything?”

“Not just them,” Francis protested. “You were amazing too! How did you even know that stuff?”
“I didn’t know it,” Tony corrected. “We still don’t know it. It’s was just a theory. If it doesn’t work out, then we’ll look for a new theory to work from.”

“But why did you even need to call in the FBI if you knew all that?” Francis asked, before shooting JJ an apologetic smile. “No offence, Agent Jareau.”

“None taken, Agent Francis.” JJ said with a smile that, hopefully, wasn’t too eager.

“Three reasons,” Tony started. “First, I wasn’t kidding about us not being able to do what their Technical Analyst does. Penelope is amazing! Second, I didn’t even have a half a theory before the BAU team started talking it over. That’s why profilers work in teams - so that the ideas can build on each other. And thirdly…”

“Because he desperately wanted to see JJ.” Asher interrupted with a grin.

Tony rolled his eyes as he elbowed his friend in the side. “And thirdly, because the BAU can get warrants that we can’t. If I go to a judge and ask for a warrant because I have a hunch, they’ll laugh in my face. The BAU has a lot more leeway.”

“So what now?” Agent Wardle asked curiously.

“Now we go back to our desks and do what we were doing this morning.” Tony answered. “We go over every piece of evidence again to make sure that there wasn’t something that we missed.”

Asher groaned. “I feel like I’m living the Groundhog day movie. Going over the same evidence over and over and over and over. Please tell me that we’re getting a day off once we’ve solved this thing.”

“Two even.” Tony promised, and JJ couldn’t help but perk up at that. It was Thursday night so, if they solved the case within the next twenty four hours, she and Tony would have the weekend together. “I’ll talk to Paul and let him know that we need a few days off.”

“Any news on who’s going to replace him yet?” Asher asked. “He’s only got four weeks left, hasn’t he?”
Tony didn’t react at all, but JJ would have been willing to bet that he was blanching inwardly. “I’m sure they’ll make an announcement soon. They’re probably just making sure they’ve got all the t’s crossed and i’s dotted.”

JJ shook her head in amusement. Had it only been a few hours since Tony had claimed not to be a politician? Because his answer had been perfect. Truthful, but not giving anything away. Tony would be so perfect for the Assistant Director position. She just hoped that he came to that conclusion too.

31-31-31

“We have a name.”

Tony’s mouth dropped open, and he knew his team would be sporting equally disbelieving expressions as they followed him into the conference room. “Already? It’s been less than an hour!”

“We’re good at what we do.” Greenaway answered, with a smug smile.

Tony resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Who’s the suspect?”

“Private Connor Johnson.” Penelope’s voice answered, sounding slightly tinny since she was on loudspeaker. “His father, Major Peter Johnson, died from liver cancer last week, and his funeral was on Saturday.”

“Liver cancer is a painful way to die.” Morgan commented. “Watching his father go through that may have been additional fuel for his rage towards his mother who left them. How old was Connor when his mother left?”

“Mary Johnson left when Connor was eleven,” Penelope answered promptly. “But things weren’t all sunshine and roses before that. There are multiple reports of the authorities being called because Connor had been left unattended while his mother was drinking her husband’s deployment away.”

“Is Mary Johnson a brunette?” Aaron asked.
“She sure was, but she died three years ago. Drove her car into a lamp post while under the influence.”

“None of that is conclusive though.” Asher commented. “There’s no way we’ll be able to get a warrant to arrest him.”

“We don’t need a warrant to bring him in for questioning.” Greenaway pointed out. “And once we have him, it shouldn’t be too hard to force a confession out of him.”

“It will be if he calls a lawyer.” Tony retorted quickly. “But if we know who he is, we can catch him in the act.”

Greenaway looked disapproving. “You would let a fourth woman be attacked just to prove a point?”

“We don’t have to let a woman be attacked.” Tony argued. “You’re brunette and, with the right hair and makeup, could look over thirty five. All we need is a couple of us watching him until he makes his move tomorrow night, and then place you in his path. When he tries to attack you, we arrest him. Not only will we have your testimony as evidence, but we’ll have caught him in possession of the murder weapon and a marine tie.”

“You want me to play bait to a serial killer?” Greenaway sounded horrified.

“You wouldn’t be in any danger.” Morgan put in. “We’d all be there, and you could have your gun on you.”

Tony turned so that he was speaking directly to Aaron. “If we arrest him hoping to force a confession out of him then we’re skirting the line of his Miranda rights. This way we wouldn’t even need a confession to make the charges stick.”

Aaron turned to Greenaway. “Elle? Do you think you can do this?”

Greenaway straightened defensively. “Yes, of course.”
Tony had never particularly enjoyed stake outs. There was too much sitting and waiting, and not enough doing for his liking. Not to mention that, in his experience, stake outs ended in a disappointing lack of results more often than not.

Though, as he sat in a car with Asher waiting for Private Connor Johnson to leave his house and start searching for his next victim, Tony couldn’t help but think that this stake out felt different. Maybe because, if he took the Assistant Director position, this could be one of the last stake outs he ever took part in.

Tony shook his head slightly to try and refocus his thoughts on the job at hand. He needed to stop thinking about Paul’s offer and concentrate on apprehending Johnson before he could hurt anyone else. Except, if the last thirty six hours was anything to go by, that was all but impossible. His ever growing internal list of the pros and cons of taking the job had been dogging his thoughts ever since Paul had first mentioned it to him.

Pro: he would be able to promote inter-agency cooperation.

Con: he wouldn’t be actively helping people anymore.

Pro: he would be able to promote a safe working environment within NCIS.

Con: he wouldn’t actually be doing any investigating.

Pro: he would be able to ensure that Andrew actually got his promotion.

Con: he would be working alone, without a team.

Pro: he would be much less likely to be shot at.

Con: he would have to work closely with Shepard.

Pro: he would…
“What are you thinking about over there?” Asher asked suddenly. “You’ve been weirdly quiet all day.”

Tony sighed and rested his head back against his headrest. “I’m just tired.”

“Sure.”

Tony winced at Asher’s disbelieving tone. “I’m just trying to work something through.” He tried again, internally warring over how much information he should he. Paul hadn’t told him that he couldn’t talk it over with people besides JJ, but he couldn’t help but feel as though the information ought to be kept private.

“Is JJ pregnant?”

Tony inhaled in surprise, before starting to cough. “What? No! Why would you think that? Did JJ tell Barb something?”

“Woah, deep breaths, man.” Asher sounded amused. “Barb hasn’t said anything.”

“Just because your wife in seven months pregnant, doesn’t mean that you can go around suggesting that my girlfriend is!”

“I thought you and JJ wanted kids.”

“In a few years maybe!” Tony retorted quickly. “We’ve been dating for less than eight months!”

“So what are you thinking about then?” Asher asked. “If you’re wondering whether you should propose, the answer is yes.”

Tony’s mouth dropped open. “Where is this coming from. Less than eight months, Asher! The fact that we’re already living together is crazy enough.”
“Shall I keep guessing?” Asher asked lightly. “Or are you going to tell me what’s on your mind?”

Tony opened his mouth, searching his mind for an excuse, before the sight of Johnson exiting his house through the front door had him jerking straighter in his chair. “Do you see him?”

“Yeah,” Asher reached for the car radio. “Agent Hotchner, do you read me?”

“Go ahead, Agent Balboa.” Aaron’s voice came through the speaker.

“Johnson is on the move.” Asher told him. “He’s walking down his path and is turning, uh, left.”

“Stay with him.” Aaron ordered. “I’ll let Elle know that she needs to move into position.”

Tony held his breath as Johnson strode down the pavement. It was unlikely that he would see them, they were parked on the other side of the street, but if Johnson did happen to notice them there was a good chance that he would panic.

“Keep on walking.” Asher muttered, before he and Tony both sighed in relief when Johnson had finally put their car behind him.

Tony waited until Johnson had almost reached the end of the road, before cautiously starting up his car engine. “Which way do you think he’s going to turn.”

“Right.” Asher answered immediately. “Left would take him away from the fancy killing zone thing Reid drew up for us.”

“Can you imagine having that brain?” Tony asked, as they watched Johnson cross the street to his right. “Did you know that he reads 20,000 words a minute? He could read the first Harry Potter book in four minutes!”

“Highschool must have been hell for him.” Asher said, before bringing the radio up to his mouth again. “Johnson has turned right. He’s heading straight for Agent Greenaway.”
Pulling the car out from the curb, Tony made a point to turn on his lights. There was nothing quite so suspicious as being trailed by a car without its headlights on. “I’ll say. He reminds me of McGee.”

“Seriously?” Asher sounded surprised. “They’re nothing alike.”

“They’re both smarter than I am.” Tony pointed out, as he turned the corner and casually drove past Johnson before pulling over to park about a hundred feet ahead of him.

“Reid is smarter than you.” Asher conceded. “Reid is smarter than everyone. McGee just thought he was smarter than everyone.”

“I’m not saying McGee is better than me.” Tony tried to soothe his friend. “Just that I didn’t understand half the mumbo jumbo he talked about.”

“Yeah, well he didn’t understand basic life skills like not disrespecting your superiors.” Asher retorted. “I still don’t understand why Stewart didn’t fire him. What kind of example did that set to the other probationary agents?”

“I asked him not to.” Tony admitted. “McGee was the way he was because Gibbs set a terrible example for him, and I wasn’t man enough to stand up to him. He deserved a chance to become the kind of agent he could be with an actual role model.”

Asher snorted. “McGee could have had a good role model if he’d spent more time listening to you and less time presuming that he knew everything.”

Tony rolled his eyes, and reached for the radio that Asher was still holding. “This is Dinozzo. Is Greenaway in the first position? Johnson is only about three minutes away.”

“Yes.” Aaron’s answer came through quickly. “And Morgan, Francis, and Wardle are in position as well.”

“Remind me why we’re stuck in car when we could be hiding in an alley and actually getting to arrest the guy?” Asher grumbled.
“Because we can’t all be in the alley, and we decided to let Francis and Wardle learn from the experience.” Tony reminded patiently, while he watched Johnson through his side mirror.

“And don’t think I’ve forgotten the way you never answered my question.”

Tony groaned. “Seriously? Don’t you have more important things to think about?”

“Not really. You should just be glad that I didn’t start nagging you about it four hours ago.”

“You know, I don’t know what I’m going to be more relieved about when we get this guy. Actually getting him, or getting away from you.” Tony retorted, without bite.

“Is it about your dad?”

Tony groaned. “No, it’s not about my dad. Why would you even bring him up?”

“Have you told him about JJ yet?”

“I haven’t spoken to him in more than a year.”

“What did he give you for Christmas last year?”

“You mean what did his secretary get me?” Tony asked bitterly. “An Electric Hammer Drill. Do you want it?”


“I’ll probably give it to JJ’s dad.” Tony decided. “He likes wood stuff.”

Asher chuckled. “He must just be thrilled with you as a son-in-law.”
“Shut up.” Tony retorted, before bringing the radio back up. “Johnson is a hundred meters out.”

“Understood.” Aaron replied.

“I’m not his son-in-law.” Tony pointed out. “JJ and I aren’t married.”

“You live with the man’s daughter. You’re either his son-in-law, or the man defiling his daughter. Which one would prefer?”

Tony grimaced. “Maybe I should keep the hammer and learn how to build things.”

“Maybe you should get an actual hammer first. Do you even know the difference between a Flathead and Phillips screwdriver?”

“Do you know how to throw knives at a target?”

Asher snorted. “Yeah, I’m sure that’s a skill JJ’s dad will be thrilled to hear that you have.”

Tony shot his friend a dirty look, before turning his attention back to the radio. “Fifty meters.”

“So it’s not about JJ, and it’s not about your dad.” Asher mused. “So just leaves work. Is it about Gibbs.”

“How does Barb even stand living with you?” Tony asked, as Greenaway suddenly stumbled out of the alley that chosen. “There she is.”

“I still think her playing drunk is too much of a risk.” Asher commented, as they watching Greenaway lean against the nearest building. “None of the other victims had any alcohol in their blood.”

“Johnson’s mother abandoned him because of her drinking habit.” Tony reminded him, as the man in
question slowly moved closer to Greenaway. “It can’t hurt. And Greenaway’s better at pretending to be drunk, than she is pretending to be normal.”

“She does make a pretty convincing drunk.” Asher admitted. “Oh, here we go. He’s spotted her.”

Tony clenched his jaw tightly as he watched Johnson’s gait change slightly, as he began to walk the last ten feet towards Greenaway. “Come on, come on.” He muttered, before breathing a sigh of relief when he saw Johnson dig into his pocket and suddenly pull out a knife. “And we’ve got him.”

Greenaway took a few smooth steps backwards, before suddenly stopping in place and neatly disarming Johnson in just a few movements.

“Woah,” Asher sounded impressed. “We definitely need to up our hand-to-hand training. Isn’t Johnson supposed to be a marine?”

“He’s only a few months out of basic.” Tony pointed out. “Besides, skill beats brute force any day, and he was expecting her to be drunk and helpless.”

“Johnson is in custody.” Aaron announced through the radio.

“Understood.” Tony returned, as he watched Morgan step out of the alley to help Greenaway maneuver the cuffed suspect towards the waiting SUV.

“Or, as the marines say it, ‘hurrah!’” Asher cheered.

“Hurrah!” Tony agreed, relief settling over his shoulders like a blanket.

Now he just had to figure out what to do about the Assistant Director position and he would be able to relax.

Chapter End Notes

Only one more chapter to go :(
A few have you have asked me to include reactions from Gibbs, McGee, Ziva and Abby before ending the story, but I'm sorry to say I won't be doing that. For me as a writer, I feel like half of the skill in crafting my stories is deciding what to leave out. This story isn't about Team Gibbs, it's about Tony and JJ and their relationship and growth, which means that when it comes to 'reactions' theirs are the only reactions that I feel fit in the story. I'm sorry if this disappoints some of you.

As with all my stories, I am open to other people using this story as an inspiration for another story. So, if you would like to write a sequel of some kind, I will be happy to link it to this story.
This chapter takes for granted that you, the readers, are familiar with NCIS episodes 3:23-24. I considered writing the details of the episode out more clearly, but decided that it made the chapter too clunky. So, if you aren't familiar with those episodes, you might want to skim a synopsis.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“That sounds amazing.”

Tony’s fingers paused on the piano keys, as JJ settled on the stool beside him. “Thank you.”

“Keep playing.” JJ ordered gently, briefly leaning against Tony’s arm. “I want to hear the end of the song.

Tony chuckled quietly, as he turned his focus back to the sheet of music in front of him. The song was one he knew well, but it was also one of the more complex pieces that he could play.

He started playing again and allowed himself to fall back into the music. Surprisingly, JJ’s presence beside him didn’t stop the world from falling away around him and leaving just him and the song and, when the song drew to a close, it was almost startling to realise that JJ was still there.

“That’s beautiful.” JJ said quietly, shifting closer on the stool so that their arms touched. “I think I’ve heard you play it before.”

“It’s one of my favourites. It’s nice to play a piece that I know well enough that I don’t have to think too hard while I’m playing it.”

“Like when you’re trying to make a hard decision?”

Tony sighed, his shoulders slumping as the breath left him. “I don’t know what to do.”
JJ was silent for a few seconds, before replying. “What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know that either.” Tony admitted. “It’s been all I’ve been thinking about for four days, and I still have no idea. Tomorrow’s Monday. What am I going to tell Paul?”

“Have you considered trying to talk it out?” JJ suggested. “You talk about everything, but you’ve hardly said a word about this. Maybe you just need to say it out loud.”

Tony considered that. “It’s worth a try, I guess.”

JJ laughed quietly. “So much confidence in my ideas.”

Tony grinned. “I said I’d give it a go, didn’t I?”

“Well, I made us each a cup of tea,” JJ stood up from the piano stool. “So come sit on the couch with me and you can tell me what you’ve been thinking.”

“You made tea?” Tony asked, standing up and taking in the two mugs on the table in front of the couch. “You played me.”

“I prefer to think of it as knowing you well.” JJ returned with a smile, as she settled down in the middle of the couch.

Tony settled down beside her, smiling as she immediately shifted to lean against him. “Would you have still given me the tea if I’d told you I didn’t want to talk?”

JJ let out a huff of laughter. “You, not wanting to talk?” She asked skeptically. “That’ll be the day.”

Tony wrapped an arm around JJ. “I’m not always talkative.”

“I know.” JJ acknowledged. “But you’ve been running this around and around in circles inside your head all weekend. Something had to give.”
“I don’t really know where to start.” Tony admitted. “I can still hardly believe that they even considered me.”

“That’s not really surprising though, is it?” JJ asked. “You’ve said yourself that you’re still working with Elton to undo the damage Gibbs’ team did to your self-esteem.”

“Not just Gibbs.” Tony muttered. “Senior didn’t exactly do me any favours in that department either.”

“So, given that you’re currently seeing a shrink because you have low self-esteem, doesn’t that mean that Paul is a better judge of your abilities than you are?” JJ offered.

Tony narrowed his eyes at the top her head. “You’ve really thought this through.”

“Do you remember the conversation we had in the car after you went undercover in Baltimore?” JJ asked. “Just before Christmas?”

Tony nodded slowly. “You were surprised at how quickly I’d been able to get the information out of Rosso.”

“I was amazed.” JJ corrected. “I hadn’t seen anything like that before. No one in my team could have done anything like that. You blew my mind. You blew all of our minds - even Morgan’s, and he’s spent time undercover before.”

Tony shifted uncomfortably. “It wasn’t…”

“See?” JJ interrupted, sitting up abruptly and leveling a finger at Tony. “Your self-esteem is still getting in the way.”

Tony tugged her back, so that she was leaning against him again. “All the more reason for me to tell Paul that I can’t do it. NCIS needs an Assistant Director who isn’t so mentally damaged that they’re seeing a shrink.”
“First, you’re not mentally damaged.” JJ retorted, sitting up again and moving so that she was sitting sideways on the couch. “And secondly, you won’t need to see Elton forever. What else have you got?”

Tony sighed. “There’s no way Gibbs will respect my authority.”

“You told me a few months ago that Gibbs doesn’t even respect Paul’s authority.” JJ returned. “And Paul’s managed to do the job regardless. Besides, it’s not like Gibbs is going to be around forever, either. Next.”

Tony opened his mouth to explain that he was an investigator as so didn’t have any of the skills he would need, when JJ raised a hand to stop him.

“Look, let’s presume that I can rebut every one of your arguments about why you’re not good enough for the role.” She suggested. “Because, I assure you, I can, and clearly Paul, Director Shepard, and the Secretary of the Navy all agree with me. And instead, you just answer one question. Do you want the job?”

“Um,” Tony frowned. Of all the questions he had been asking himself, and arguments he had been debating, that wasn’t something that he had really considered. Did he want the job?

His first answer was no. A firm no. He was an investigator. A detective. One of the guys on the front line of crime. There to make the world a safer place. He didn’t want to be shackled to a desk job where his main responsibilities would be paperwork and politics.

Except, if the events of the last year had taught him anything, it was that something was rotten in the state of Denmark. Agents were prioritising vengeance over justice and, more often than not, allowing their personal agendas to influence cases. Probies like McGee were being taught bad habits, and somehow a Mossad Officer had been given a place in a MCRT that would lead to her being given access to confidential information.

NCIS, as it was now, was not making the world a safer place. Or at least, it wasn’t doing as good a job as it is ought. And if Tony could fix that, if he could be part of the solution that returned NCIS to its former glory, if he could do more good as Assistant Director than as a Team Lead, then who was he to turn the opportunity down?

“Yes,” He answered slowly, hardly believing the word as it came out of his mouth. “I think I do.”
“Well, there you go then.” JJ nodded, as though everything was decided.

Tony shook his head. “It’s not that easy.”

“I think it is.” JJ disagreed. “You want to do it. All the important people think you can do it. And I thoroughly support your want to do it. What more is there to say?”

“I don’t think I can do it.” Tony reminded her.

“Yes, but we’ve just had the conversation about how you’re a bit biased.” JJ smiled.

“Don’t think an Assistant Director should feel capable of doing their job?” Tony asked.

“You’d think so,” JJ admitted. “But have you ever heard of Imposter Syndrome?”

Tony sighed. “This is one of Reid’s little gems of knowledge, right?”

JJ grinned fondly. “You know me so well. I won’t give you all the dates and statistics that Spencer gave us…”

“Because you’ve forgotten most of them.” Tony muttered under his breath, earning himself a whack on the arm.

“But,” JJ raised her voice slightly. “Apparently Impostor Syndrome is basically when a person feels like a fraud, even when it’s clear to everyone else that they’re not.”

Tony frowned. “A fraud? I don’t feel like a fraud.”

“Would you feel like a fraud if you were the Assistant Director?” JJ asked. “As though you didn’t really deserve to be there and worried that someone would figure that out and fire you?”
“Yeah, I would.” Tony admitted, a little confused about where she was going with the thought.

“Well, would it surprise you to learn that seventy percent of people experience Imposter Syndrome?” JJ asked, with a hint of triumph in her tone.

Tony’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

“Exactly.” JJ looked pleased with herself. “So if there’s a good chance that anyone in the position is going to have those same doubts, why shouldn’t it be you?”

Tony had always envied people whose professions allowed them to turn their phones off as they slept, and he’d never envied them quite so much as he did when his phone rang shrilly at two in the morning.

Pushing himself up on his elbow, he grabbed the phone from his bedside table and brought it up to his ear. “Dinozzo.”

“Are you happy now?!” A woman’s voice shrieked down the line.

Tony flinched back, away from the sound. “Who is this?”

“Gibbs is in hospital and it’s all your fault!”

“Abby,” Tony’s sleep-dazed mind concluded, as he pushed himself upright so that his legs were hanging over the bed. “What do you mean ‘Gibbs is in hospital’? What happened?”

“Tony?” JJ asked sleepily, her hand resting on Tony’s back.

“Don’t pretend that you care!” Abby snapped. “If you’d cared so much you would have been there
to protect him! Not in bed with your flavour of the month.”

Tony sighed. “Abby, if anything could have been done to protect Gibbs, Andrew would have done it. Is Gibbs alright?”

“I don’t know!” Abby sounded more than a little hysterical. “I’m at the hospital and the nurse let me in, but then Shepard kicked me out. He’s in surgery.”

“How did you even know that Gibbs was hurt?” Tony asked.

“Ducky rang me.” Abby answered. “I guess I should be glad that you haven’t managed to get him fired too!”

Tony winced at the venomous tone. “Abby…”

“Don’t Abby me!” Abby snapped. “Know this, Tony Dinozzo, if Gibbs died, I’ll kill you!”

“Threatening the life of a federal agent is a crime, Abby.” Tony warned, and he could feel JJ jerk upright in the bed behind him.

“You’d just better hope he lives!” Abby retorted, before abruptly ending the call.

Tony groaned, as he rubbed at his face. “What a way to wake up.”

“What happened?” JJ asked.

“Apparently Gibbs is in hospital.” Tony answered, opening his phone’s contacts list. “I need to ring Andrew, see if he needs any help. They still haven’t replaced McGee, so, without Gibbs, he’s just got Ziva.”

“I’ll make you a cup of tea to take with you.” JJ offered, slipping out of bed.
“I love you.” Tony told her, sincerity radiating through him despite the situation.

“I love you too.”

Selecting Andrew’s name in his contacts list, Tony brought his phone up to his ear as he waited for the call to go through.

“I take it you’ve heard.” Andrew said, as he answered the phone.

“Yeah,” Tony confirmed, not wanting to distract Andrew with details of Abby’s call. “Do you want an extra pair of hands?”

Andrew’s relieved sigh was answer in itself. “That would be great. The bomb exploded five hours ago, so we’ve got most of the evidence to forensics and autopsy, and we’ve got the ship’s captain in custody, but we hardly have anything to work with.”

“The bomb?” Tony asked, as he began to get dressed with the phone pressed to his ear. “Andrew, all I know is that Gibbs is in the hospital. You’re going to need to start at the beginning.”

“I’m in New Hampshire.” Andrew started. “Gibbs was supposed to extracting an undercover agent from the crew of the ‘Bakir Kamir’, but a bomb went off while he was still aboard. There was one casualty and Gibbs was seriously injured. At this point we’re presuming that our victim is Agent Abog Galib.”

“What was Galib investigating on the ‘Bakir Kamir’?” Tony asked, as he buckled his belt.

“Terrorism.” Andrew answered shortly, before continuing. “He’s from our National Security Unit.”

“So the terrorist caught on to him and decided to kill two birds with one stone.” Tony concluded. “Does Gibbs have protection at the hospital? If the terrorist thinks he knows something then he might try again.”

“No,” Andrew sounded as though he was kicking himself for the oversight. “Who should I call?”
“I’ll ask Paul to arrange it when I call him about getting a flight to New Hampshire.” Tony promised. “Don’t worry, Andrew, we’ll get this guy.”

32-32-32

It was strange to work a case with Gibbs’ team again. Especially since, aside from Andrew who Tony had never worked a case with, the team only consisted of Officer David, who he had barely worked with for three weeks before leaving. There was a part of his brain that kept expecting to see McGee taking photos, or Kate measuring the crime scene. Ducky was there too, of course, but Ducky was always at the scene of Tony’s murder investigations.

Though, as much as the sentimental aspect of Tony missed Kate and McGee, he couldn’t help but think that Andrew and Officer David were more useful on a crime scene. Or at least, Officer David’s knowledge of Turkish would have made her more useful if she hadn’t shown herself to be far too violent and volatile to take part in investigating the crew.

So, with Andrew and Paul’s permission, Tony had sent her off to the hospital to stand guard over Gibbs as he recovered from his coma. Officer David had been less than impressed by the order, but Tony wasn’t worried. Her furious reaction was just another piece of ammunition that he would be able to use when he made a move to terminate her liaison status with NCIS.

Tony hated cases like this one. There was a lot of evidence, there always was after bomb blasts, but nothing useful. Even Asher’s repeated interrogations with the ship’s captain wasn’t getting them very far. Though, after two days of frantic investigation they finally managed to confirm the identity of the terrorist - Pinpin Pular. Except an identity was only half of the answers they needed, and the second half, his location, proved to be much harder to find.

It was like the serial murder case they had worked the week earlier, where every single minute brought them closer to the next murder. Only, this time, they weren’t just worried for the death of the one woman. There was a whole ship out there somewhere that would blow up if they didn’t there on time.

32-32-32

They didn’t get there in time.
It was an awful end to an awful four days of frantic investigation, and the fact that it could have been avoided if the National Security Deputy Director had just listened to Gibbs’ frantic pleas for them to use covert action to try and apprehend the terrorist just made it all the worse.

(Though Tony wasn’t sure that he would have listened to Gibbs either. It was hard to take a man seriously when he was all but frothing at the mouth as he yelled at you while wearing hospital scrubs. The fact that they all knew that Gibbs was still recovering from a severe knock to the head that had removed fifteen years worth of memories didn’t really help either.)

“How do you do it?” Tony asked Paul, wincing as he heard the level of exhausted emotion in his voice. “How do you work with men like that? Who would rather make a good headline than save lives?”

Paul looked thoughtful. “I remember that, if I wasn’t in my position, someone like that might be. If good men all decide to get up and go home, that only leaves the crooked men left.”

“And the good women.” Tony offered with a weary grin.

“True.” Paul acknowledged with an amused nod. “The other way I cope is by making sure that I look at the big picture. This wasn’t all Deputy Director Welsh’s fault.”

“No,” Tony agreed. “If we’d been able to work faster…”

“That’s not what I mean.” Paul interrupted. “If Gibbs had rung me or Director Shepard when he’d first remembered what Pinpin Pular had told him, then we may have had the time to convince Welsh to make a different decision. Or, if that had failed, had time to go over his head.”

Tony grimaced. “Has Gibbs really resigned?”

“He has.” Paul answered, tapping his finger against some paper on his desk. “I have his letter of resignation right here.”

Tony glanced at the paper. “Can we,” He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “Can we make sure he doesn’t come back?”
“If it’s the last thing I do here.” Paul promised. “I’m going to sit down with HR and make sure that his resignation is as airtight as it can possibly be.”

“Director Shepard won’t be able to reverse it?” Tony asked.

Paul leaned back in his seat and stared seriously at Tony. “That depends.”

“On?”

“On whether you’ve decided to accept the position I offered you last week.”

Tony frowned. “Even if I’m the Assistant Director, Shepard would still outrank me.”

“That doesn’t give her permission to contradict your staffing decisions on a whim.” Paul promised. “And she still has to answer to the Secretary of the Navy. If she tries to reinstate Gibbs while you’re Assistant Director, you can go to SecNav and tell me what you told me a few months ago. That you believe that her previous sexual relationship with Gibbs blinds her. It’s what I will be doing if he tries to come back in the next three weeks.”

Tony blanched. “Three weeks? Last week it was four.”

Paul looked amused. “That is how time works, Tony. So? What’s your decision? Will you be NCIS’ next Assistant Director of Criminal Investigations?”

Tony swallowed heavily, and tried to quiet his fast beating hard. He could do this. He could step into the known. He could say, “Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

This brings us to the end of Moving Forward.

It’s a bit hard to believe that the story is finally over (I had originally planned for it to only have around 25 chapters), and I hope you have enjoyed the story as much as I have.
I am definitely going to be starting another story, but it will be a while before I start posting anything since:
1). I haven't fully decided on which of the stories in my head I will be chasing down.
2). I prefer to have a story mostly finished before I start posting it.
3). My work is very full on at the moment.

That being said: watch this space. Another story is coming soon :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!